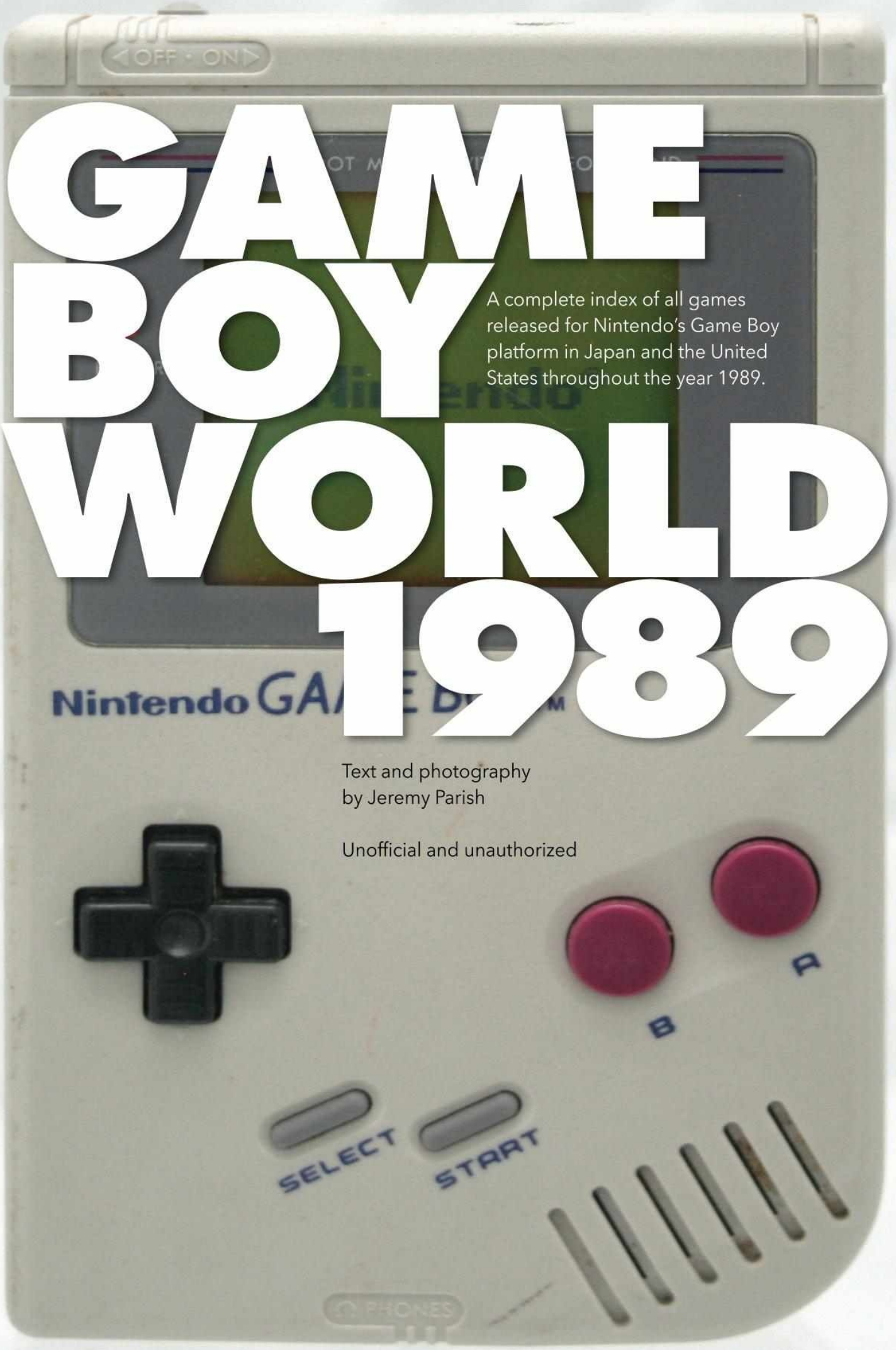


GAME BOY WORLD 1989

A complete index of all games released for Nintendo's Game Boy platform in Japan and the United States throughout the year 1989.

Text and photography
by Jeremy Parish

Unofficial and unauthorized

GAME BOY WORLD 1989

Text, photos, and design
by Jeremy Parish

Contents

Nintendo Game Boy

Japanese name: *Game Boy* • ゲームボーイ

Designer: Nintendo R&D1 (Gunpei Yokoi, lead designer)

Manufacturer: Nintendo

Release date: 4.21.1989 [JP] | 8.1989 [US] | 9.28.1990 [EU]

To fully understand the nature of the Game Boy hardware, it's important to understand what came before Game Boy. The idea of portable gaming certainly didn't come into existence from nowhere the day Game Boy launched; various toy companies had been dabbling in the concept since the '70s, including Nintendo. In fact, it's kind of hard to say where to draw the line for the true first handheld game — which was it?

The earliest portable systems hailed from toymakers, which makes a certain amount of sense; there's a pretty clear line of continuity from mechanical or gravity-powered toys to Game Boy. Nintendo itself had a lengthy history with handheld amusements, many of which were designed by the man responsible for this system: Gunpei Yokoi.

So when you look back at one of those simple toys where you try to shoot ball bearings into a hole or whatever, you're looking at the blueprint for Game Boy. Eventually, the advent of inexpensive, compact electronic components allowed

manufacturers to cram LED lights into them. Then simple circuits and LCD art. Then came legitimate computer processors — like the Game Boy's CPU, which was based on the processors that powered the PC revolution of the late '70s and early '80s.

Impressive, right? Well… honestly, in terms of technology, Game Boy was the furthest thing from impressive, even in 1989. The concept wasn't even that original; Milton Bradley had produced the first- ever LCD portable to run on interchangeable cartridges all the way back in 1979, a full decade before Game Boy's launch. The MicroVision was agonizingly primitive and tremendously expensive, but it helped lay the groundwork.

As Microvision faltered, Nintendo found success with the Game & Watch lineup. These were dedicated LCD handheld units that were roughly the same price as an Atari game cartridge — a complete game and system in one.

The one other notable innovation of the '80s came from Epoch, who made a limited and ultimately short-lived effort with the Japan-only Game Pocket Computer, which looked like a rough draft of the Game Boy but was doomed by its extremely high cost and limited library. The next cartridge-based handheld to enter serious production also came from a Western company, Epyx, though their "Handy" portable didn't see light of day for nearly three years after its inception, when Atari bought it up and marketed it as Lynx. Game Boy ultimately beat Lynx to retail by a matter of months, but the close release of the two systems makes for a telling study in purpose and philosophy. Game Boy used a puny processor and a frankly terrible screen compared to the competition… but those features worked to its advantage, allowing Nintendo to offer it for less than half the price of the Lynx with relatively low battery costs, too. Sega's Game Gear would improve on Lynx's tech, but it too would fall afoul of both its up-front and its long-term costs.

Nintendo has been a major force in the video games industry almost since the beginning, but historically it's rarely competed on the same terms as other game makers. Even today, the company's history as a toy and gadget maker continues to shape its approach to hardware design, sometimes for better, sometimes for worse. Sometimes, to see the better, you need to adopt an unconventional perspective. If you look at Game Boy as a game system, its modest power and inferior LCD seem like sheer folly. Taken as a successor to Nintendo's long line of kid-sized gizmos and amusements, though, these traits make perfect sense.

The man responsible for Game Boy's hardware design, Gunpei Yokoi, had been the mastermind of countless Nintendo gadgets. Former NCL president Hiroshi Yamauchi had catapulted Yokoi to prominence when he saw the man messing around with a toy-like device of his own design to kill down time while working on Nintendo's assembly line. Yamauchi promptly commissioned Yokoi to turn the toy into an actual product, which become one of Nintendo's first commercial hits: The Ultra Hand.

In the years that followed, Yokoi spearheaded the design of dozens of toys, many of which worked as compact electromechanical renditions of arcade amusements. Another major hit for Yokoi came in the form of the Love Tester, a simple toy that measured the electrochemical voltage of two people to "predict" their romantic compatibility. Over time, Nintendo's toy line incorporated more and more electronic elements, which made their mid-'70s entrée into dedicated, singletitle game consoles a natural one.

And with their flag planted in the soil of the embryonic games industry, Nintendo's Game & Watch seemed a similarly natural progression: Tiny portable gadgets that repurposed adult-oriented technology (in this case, LCD wristwatches) for kids. And adults, too, but mostly kids.

From this history came the primal stew that gave rise to Game Boy. But even then, the device didn't come to life until it was jolted by the bolt of lightning that was Sony's Walkman. One of the most revolutionary electronic devices ever made, the Walkman made hi-fi audio portable, packing the ability to play radio and cassette tapes into a compact, battery-powered device that output music through a pair of headphones. That was the Walkman's fundamental revolution: It exploded the concept of personal electronics into the mainstream. Sony created a self-contained gadget designed for a single person, compromising top-of-the-line sound for the sake of convenience and portability, and this philosophy influenced hardware design for decades to come.

Nintendo was hardly shy about borrowing Sony's incredible idea; "Game Boy" reads as an obvious riff on "Walkman," adopting the English-language construction of the cassette player's name while also speaking to its purpose (playing video games) and target audience (boys). Plus, Game Boy made it clear that the handheld was meant as the junior counterpart to the NES — the serious game experience was still to be found on the console, while the handheld offered a less completely formed take.

Game Boy turned NES-era game design into a solitary pursuit… but of course, Nintendo's love of play and socialization still found a place in the system despite its being designed for a single player to hold and play at intimate range. While Game Boy excelled at reproducing NES-like single-player experiences (the first year alone would bring players Super Mario, Castlevania, and Final Fantasy spin-offs), the system could also connect to other Game Boys through its built-in Link Cable feature.

The Link Cable allowed as many as 16 players to daisy-chain together… well, at least in theory. In practice, all but a handful of multiplayer games limited themselves to twoperson experiences. Like so many Game Boy features, this was by no means a Nintendo innovation, either. Atari's Lynx included an identical feature, the ComLynx, which enabled similar head-to-head play options. But Link Cable's presence demonstrated Nintendo's priorities — after all, Lynx was meant to be the Cadillac of portable game systems, a massive luxury device with all the bells and whistles. Game Boy was a K Car, compact and inexpensive, its feature set stripped to the bare minimum. Nintendo cut every corner they could, but the ability to socialize through play nevertheless made the final cut.

Rather, Game Boy's compromises had less to do with the system's basic feature set and were more centered around the quality of those features. The system's processor was a variant on the humble Zilog Z80, an 8-bit derivative of the legendary 8080 that helped power the PC revolution of the 1970s. 10 years prior to Game Boy, the Z80 was a giant; by 1989, however, it seemed a primitive pipsqueak next to the likes of Motorola's 68000, which had powered the Macintosh in 1984 and now ticked away beneath the hood of Sega's Genesis. The chip Game Boy used as its main processor was similar to the *secondary* coprocessor the Genesis kept around almost as an afterthought to allow for vestigial Master System compatibility.

By a similar token, Game Boy's screen was barely adequate. Capable of a mere four shades of greyscale, it couldn't even perform that task effectively; its dull greenish cast set the "white" color value to a putrid shade of sickly green, and the darker tones weren't much better. Even with the contrast dial cranked up, its facsimile of black was closer in tone and value to rotting asparagus.

Like most consumer-oriented LCDs of the day, the Game Boy's screen employed a passive matrix display. This resulted in a severe motion blur that affected moving objects as the screen slowly redrew graphics. For simple, single-screen affairs like puzzle games and old-school arcade titles, this was hardly detrimental. But for anything that scrolled, such as platformers and shooters, Game Boy's visuals quickly degenerated into a smeary mess. Every moving object was trailed by a blurry afterimage as once-darkened pixels faded to "white." This severely undermined the playability of many games, especially the NES-caliber experiences developers sought to make portable.

And yet, despite these individual failings, the system itself was practically impervious to failure. Its particular design flaws were more than offset by all the advantages Yokoi built into the system. Its rugged, compact design definitely spoke to the work of an experienced toy designer familiar with the utter lack of care with which children treat their playthings. The Game Boy hardware could withstand any number of offenses — impacts, scratches, even fire — and keep ticking away. Crack the screen and you could still make out the graphics running away happily around the bleeding LCD cells. Run it through the

washing machine and it would kick back to life a few days later when its innards had dried out again. The Game Boy was like the Terminator: Invincible, unstoppable, and relentless in its mission to entertain children.

Of course, Yokoi had another advantage working in his favor: Nintendo's utter dominance of two-thirds of the global video games industry. The simple fact that the people behind Mario had produced a handheld system was good for a few million sales alone. The Super NES would draw fire for making the NES obsolete and mooting kids' extensive 8-bit libraries a few years later, but there was no such concern for the Game Boy. It was a wholly unique device from the NES, despite its obvious kinship: More primitive and limited, and one used in a totally different fashion.

Even if Lynx had beaten Game Boy to the market, Atari was able to offer consumers with very little in the way of must-play games on day one. Nintendo, on the other hand, delivered not only a legitimate (if miniaturized and somewhat weird) Super Mario game but even packed in the majestic and hotly sought-after Tetris as a free extra for the American release of the console. And within a matter of months, it brought the full fury of Nintendo third-party partners to bear on the market as well.

Atari couldn't begin to compete, not in 1989. U.S. game developers were still struggling to catch up in the console space, having shifted to personal computers and arcades after the early '80s crash that had been precipitated by Atari in the first place. No, consoles were a playground dominated by the Japanese, and Japanese developers weren't going to partner with Atari when Nintendo had its own homegrown handheld option available to them. After all, despite Nintendo's reputation for unfavorable licensing terms, the Famicom and NES had made many publishers very, very rich, and the Game Boy represented the most obvious opportunity for extending that filthy lucre into a new medium. The Game Boy looked like easy money even in the midst of Japan's '80s economic boom, a time when the yen practically minted itself. The system had a guaranteed global reach of millions. Its humble hardware was easy and cheap to develop for; the Z80 processor was an industry standard, well-documented and familiar to any programmer worth his salt. The hardware was cheap. Software was cheap, too. And Nintendo already had an amazing global distribution system.

For developers who already had extensive experience in NES game design, its little cousin must have seemed like a total no-brainer. The biggest drawback to Game Boy, besides its harrowing technical limitations, was the fact that every game had to stand up against Nintendo's own first-party projects.

It may not have been much to look at, but between its familiar NES-style control setup and the Link Cable, the Game Boy could offer a reasonable simulation of NES play experiences — enough to satisfy kids, certainly, and appealing in its own way to adults as well. Puzzle and parlor games made a better fit for Game Boy than kid-friendly mascot action games. Despite its juvenile moniker, the system sunk its hooks into grownups in short order as well.

Of course, the no-brainer business appeal of Game Boy also worked against the system; thanks to the low barriers of entry to development, the machine was quickly inundated by decidedly less-than-exceptional wares. The early years of the Game Boy saw

its library flooded by repetitive puzzle games. Shopping for Game Boy software meant slogging through a minefield of licensed crap. And a preponderance of two-bit Pokémon clones made the system's later years similarly fatiguing. Things were even worse in Japan, where dozens of indistinguishable horse racing simulators, pachinko games, and mahjong titles choked the release lists. American gamers missed out on a few gems over the years, but the bulk of unlocalized games were better stranded overseas. And even then, the U.S. Game Boy market saw plenty of homegrown mediocrity for players to contend with.

These combined factors — low cost, adequate technology, kid-friendly design, an extensive and varied library, and tons of third-party support — made Game Boy an unrivaled success. The competition produced some impressive attempts to take on Game Boy over the years, including the powerful Game Gear (literally an upgraded, portable Master System) and the TurboXpress from NEC (which played actual TurboGrafx-16 games). Yet none of them hit on all the same success points as Nintendo, and none of them came close to selling anywhere near as well as Game Boy.

Ultimately, Nintendo came away the clear victor in handheld gaming, though that too exacted a certain toll as well. Lacking true competition, Nintendo drifted along after a while and ceased to innovate. Instead of producing a Game Boy follow-up after seven years, they instead simply produced a more energy-efficient model with a better screen: Game Boy Pocket. Meanwhile, Yokoi focused his efforts on the tragic Virtual Boy, another toy-inspired self-contained gaming system, but one that lacked the smart, no-frills appeal of Game Boy. Nintendo's salvation from that brush with disaster actually came from Game Boy itself, when Pokémon gave the system its second wind in the mid-'90s.

With the rest of the industry (and the press) too focused on the heated 32-bit console wars to care about handhelds, Game Boy flew beneath the radar until Pokémon became too big to ignore. The phenomenon caught everyone except Nintendo flat-footed, and Game Boy mopped up once again. In fact, Pokémon's success gave Nintendo the freedom to shelve the Game Boy's direct successor, the 32-bit Project Atlantis (which would eventually become Game Boy Advance), for five years as they continued to rake in the easy money with the aged Game Boy hardware. Rather than take handheld gaming into the next generation, Nintendo chose instead to follow up with the Game Boy Color, an incremental upgrade to the old black-and-white system. Less a new generation than an enhancement, Game Boy Color offered smooth intercompatibility with its predecessor's library, with a number of cartridges offering dual support for both platforms.

In the end, Game Boy remained a viable platform for more than a decade. Its final release, the dual-compatible One Piece: Maboroshi no Grand Line Boukenki!, launched in Japan on June 28, 2002: More than 13 years after the system's April 21, 1989 debut, and more than a year after the arrival of its second successor, Game Boy Advance. Meanwhile, Game Boy Color stuck around for more than a year after that; the licensed utility app Doraemon Study Boy: Kanji Yomekaki Master launched on July 18, 2003.

While not exactly the most exciting finale to a platform that lived well beyond any reasonable estimates of its natural life, in a way, that's kind of fitting. Underwhelming and/or licensed content was the Game Boy's bread-and-butter, and the system's unexciting competence kept the tills ringing for years after its superior competitors were long since dead and buried.

The Game Boy Link Cable

Game Boy Link Cable

Every Game Boy came packed with a Link Cable. With a Link Cable, two Game Boys could connect to one another for two- to four-person multiplayer experiences (though three- and four-person play was only possible once Nintendo released F-1 Race, which came with a special adapater to allow the additional players to join in). Most of the games released in 1989 made use of the Link Cable in some capacity, with the main exceptions coming from the titles spun off from single-player NES games: Super Mario, Castlevania, Final Fantasy. Some games lent themselves more obviously to multiplayer than others; sports titles were a natural fit, and for Fist of the North Star it was practically mandatory. The Link Cable also connected to a number of peripherals, including the Game Boy Printer. Its moment of glory, however, came with the arrival of Pokémon, whose killer feature — trading creatures — couldn't have happened without the ability to connect two systems. Of course, these days game systems come equipped with wi-fi and Bluetooth, so something so cumbersome as a physical connection seems bizarrely antiquated. But in its time, it was an essential piece of the Game Boy equation.

GUNPEI YOKOI

Gunpei Yokoi's design philosophies shaped not only the direction of the Game Boy, but Nintendo's creative DNA as well. When Nintendo hired Yokoi back in 1965, they couldn't possibly have known how important and influential a thinker they'd brought aboard. But he quickly proved his worth, demonstrating his knack for gadgetry by creating what would become Nintendo's first-ever hit toy, the Ultra Hand.

Yokoi had his hand in numerous Nintendo toy projects throughout the '60s and '70s, many of which — such as Duck Hunt — were destined to become immortalized as classic NES games. Retailers usually treated video games as an extension of toys rather than electronics back in those days, so perhaps it's unsurprising that Yokoi's work shifted from playthings to electronic entertainment — back then, they were all the same thing.

Both of Yokoi's best-known game systems, Game Boy and Game & Watch, demonstrated his philosophy of creating affordable entertainment by using commoditized components, stripping out superfluity, and paring down a device to its basics. Game & Watch used dirt-cheap LCD watch screens and processors in a novel and entertaining way. Game Boy paired an aging Z80 processor to barely tolerable passive-matrix greyscale LCD screens. And yet both devices managed to overcome their limitations and their competitors alike.

Still, perhaps the purest example of Yokoi's philosophy at work comes not in a video game but rather in the form of Lefty RX, a low-cost remote control race car. As its name suggests, the Lefty RX had a distinct design quirk: It could only turn in a single direction. While the idea of a race car that can only turn left may sound absolutely daft, it's exactly the sort of "lateral thinking" that Yokoi valued. By stripping out the complex mechanisms that other remote control cars used for full steering, the Lefty RX could be manufactured at a fraction of the competition's price. And for race cars, being able to veer only to the left isn't even that big a limitation; a classic race track consists of an oval, right? So in a race, a car is only turning in one direction anyway.

By looking critically at an industry standard and applying some massive but logical cuts to the design, Yokoi created a version that made modest compromises to play value while coming in at a fraction of the cost of the competition. Years later, Game Boy would apply the same philosophy to handheld gaming: Stripping out color graphics and processing power, but still managing to produce a satisfying if crude simulation of the NES experience on the go. And at less than half the cost of the Atari Lynx, with far lighter battery demands.

Yokoi spent much of his career as division chief for Nintendo's R&D1 — Research and Development 1, a more technically focused group than Shigeru Miyamoto's Entertainment Analysis Division. R&D1 is generally treated as Nintendo's legacy division, credited for the creation of arcade games stretching back into the 1970s, as well as most of the early "black box" games. R&D1 and EAD split apart around the time of the original Mario Bros., and Yokoi oversaw all the odd non-Miyamoto Mario games such as Wrecking Crew.

Under Yokoi, R&D1 oversaw some of Nintendo's most intricate games. While EAD games were characterized by their innate elegance and fluid feel, R&D1's tended to be

more complex — often experimental, as well. Metroid combined the platform action of Super Mario Bros. with the RPG-like adventure mechanics of The Legend of Zelda, and Famicom Grand Prix II: 3D Hot Rally saw the company making its first foray into 3D effects. Still, it was Game Boy that best demonstrated Yokoi's beliefs, compromising fidelity for low cost and ease of use. That same philosophy defined even the unpopular Virtual Boy, the ungainly game device that many regard as Yokoi's career-ending failure. Virtual Boy was a financial disaster for Nintendo, despite being a clever hack of a device.

Unfortunately, Yokoi never had the chance to recover from Virtual Boy's failure. He left Nintendo soon after, and his follow-up endeavor, Koto, only produced a couple of products before he died in a highway accident in October 1997.

The keen combination of economy and usability Yokoi brought to Nintendo's hardware lineup, and the quirky sense of creativity that accompanied them, remains unique in video games. Only Nintendo has continued to carry forward his philosophy of inventive applications for aging, inexpensive technology. In fact, one could argue that Nintendo only fares well when it operates according to Yokoi's tenets.

Gunpei Yokoi may be nearly 20 years gone at this point, but his legacy and his shadow loom over Nintendo, and over gaming at large. Even today, the medium as a whole only stands to prosper by preserving, and living by, his example.

Nintendo Game & Watch

The Game & Watch series remains one of the most collectible of Nintendo creations; the company released many dozens of different units over the course of a decade in a wide variety of formats. From the basic units like Ball or Octopus to more advanced doublescreen creations like Mario's Cement Factory, Game & Watch basically amounted to little more than pocket calculators that replaced mathematical functions with rudimentary game controls. Even the top-of-the-line units, like the Tabletop editions of Popeye and Snoopy, were simply LCD units despite resembling Coleco's high-end vacuum fluorescent display games. In keeping with the Yokoi way of things, these pseudo-VFD titles instead used standard LCD art and cleverly arranged colored overlays to affect the look (if not the luminescence) of expensive competitors at a fraction of the cost.

Nintendo Game & Watch Gallery 2 for Game Boy (Japanese version), 1997

Given the close relationship between Game & Watch and Game Boy, it was only natural that the latter would eventually play home to "compilations" of the old dedicated LCD titles. The Game & Watch Gallery series did a bang-up job of reproducing their predecessors, supplementing them with fancied-up remakes sporting better visuals and refined play. Nintendo continues to pay tribute to Game & Watch, with Club Nintendo-exclusive remakes for DS, cameos in games like WarioWare, and even a role for Mr. Game & Watch himself in Smash Bros.

Alleyway

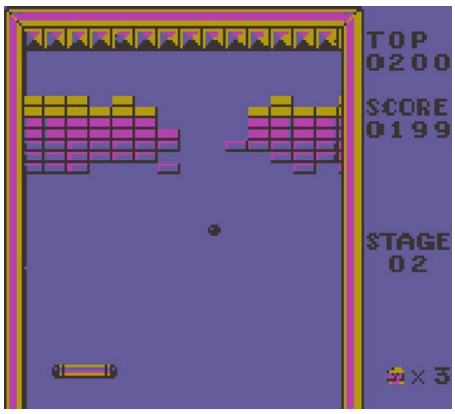
Japanese title: *Alleyway: Block Kuzushi* • アレイウェイ - ブロック崩し

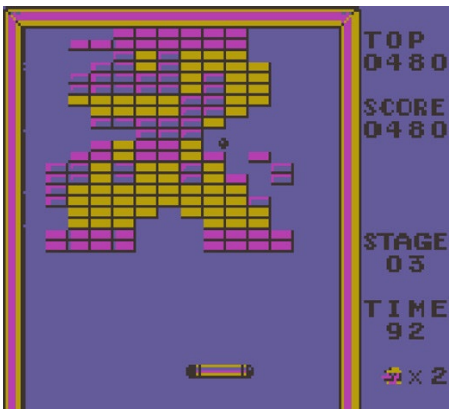
Developer: Nintendo R&D1/Intelligent Systems

Publisher: Nintendo

Release date: 4.21.1989 [JP] | 8.1989 [US] | 9.28.1990 [EU]

Super Game Boy: Enhanced color palette





You can see the Game Boy's roots in the Game & Watch series on clear display in

Nintendo's first generation of releases for the system, and nowhere more than Alleyway. A dated take on the block-breaking genre even at the time of its 1989 debut – Taito's far more sophisticated Arkanoid predates it by a good three years – Alleyway feels like a midpoint between Game & Watch and "real" portable video games. This isn't to say it's a poor game or badly made; merely unambitious.

The nature of Alleyway's modest design is somewhat given away in its Japanese box art, which gives it the subtitle "Block Kuzushi" – not only is that the the Japanese term for the genre precipitated by Breakout, it also calls back to Nintendo's pre-console home game days. The Nintendo Color TV Game Block Kuzushi was one of five dedicated (that is, lacking an interchangeable cartridge slot) home game consoles Nintendo manufactured in conjunction with Mitsubishi in the late '70s. In their own way, these systems represented a sort of midpoint too: A transitional phase between Nintendo's days as a dedicated toy maker and a dedicated video game maker. The Color TV Game Block Kuzushi also represented Shigeru Miyamoto's first attempt at bringing his art school training to bear on the company's products, as he designed the case and labels for the device. In the annals of Nintendo history, it holds a notable place.

Very little official information about Alleyway seems to exist online; the game has no staff roll, and I've been unable to locate individual credits for the game in either English or Japanese. The game is alternately credited to Nintendo R&D1 and Intelligent Systems; the latter claims credit for it on their corporate site without offering any further details, only a link to Nintendo's official archival page for the game. Intelligent Systems is sometimes cited as having spun off from R&D1 to some degree, and given the role R&D1 had in Nintendo's pre-Famicom product design (division head Gumpei Yokoi having worked on devices like Ele-conga and the famous Ultra Hand, among others), it doesn't seem unlikely that some of Alleyway's staff had creative contact with the Color TV Game Block Kuzushi a decade prior (especially in light of the longevity of tenure that seems to define Nintendo's top talent) and that the older device was on their mind as they built this debut release for the new handheld system.

Whatever the case, given Nintendo's penchant for self-referentialism – including, here in Alleyway, a number of block arrangements based on Nintendo character sprites – the reference to Block Kuzushi on the cover seems as likely to be a nod to Nintendo's home gaming origins as a declaration of genre. After all, Baseball's Japanese box art doesn't give the game's subtitle as "Sports," and Yakuman's box doesn't make prominent mention of mahjong. In fact, Alleyway is the only one of Nintendo's day-one releases to feature any sort of subtitle or box-front genre designation whatsoever. However deliberate the intent, Alleyway positioned the Game Boy as a new venture jumping off from two different points of historic inflection for Nintendo: The block-breaking action of Color TV Game Block Kuzushi, and the limited but entertaining black-and-white stylings of the Game & Watch family.

At its most fundamental level, Alleyway plays very much in the mold of Breakout. Players control a small paddle that patrols the bottom of the screen, reflecting a ball into various arrangements of bricks that line the upper half of the screen. In most cases, the ball breaks away a brick upon impact, rebounding from the collision at an oblique angle. A stage ends once the ball has destroyed all the bricks. Once you've completed all 32 stages

(24 basic, 8 bonus), the game ends.

In contrast to more sophisticated contemporaries, such as the aforementioned Arkanoid, Alleyway lacks depth and intricacy. Besides the lack of power-ups, the ball can only reflect from the player's paddle at three different angles, depending on the speed of the paddle at the time of impact and which point the ball strikes. It speeds up very slightly the longer you play, and in later levels the paddle shrinks by 50% once you reach the back row of bricks.

Despite its fairly basic design, graphics, and mechanics, Alleyway does offer some nice perks over basic Breakout. For starters, the game won't let you become locked in an endless cycle if you set up a stable arrangement that causes the ball to reflect back to the paddle and continue following the same route; after a few hits in a loop, the ball will change its angle slightly, forcing you to respond. This can be a tremendous help when trying to clean up the last elusive brick or two; if the ball is just barely missing a block, you can wait it out. More often than not, the ball will change its course slightly and hit the unreachable brick. Also of note: Mario cameos as the paddle's "pilot," reprising a role similar to the one he played in Pinball for NES.

In addition to a number of levels arranged to look like Mario characters, Alleyway also includes bonus stages in which the ball passes through blocks as it smashes them; players have a limited amount of time in which to clear out all bricks. The 32 levels essentially break down to eight sets of four stages: A standard Breakout clone with standard rules; a dynamic stage in which various bricks move in an endless horizontal scroll; a hazard stage in which the blocks advance toward the paddle; and a bonus stage with no penalty for failure.

Alleyway netted mediocre scores at the time of its release – back when most magazines actually did make use of the full scale – and was raked over the coals several years ago when it appeared on 3DS Virtual Console (though at times without a proper understanding of the game's heritage). Its relatively shallow design and monotonous visuals definitely limit its appeal, especially in the current market where so many cheap or free games of this format jockey for attention in the mobile space. In 1989, however, it made for a pleasantly fulfilling experience – by far the most elaborate portable block game the world had ever seen, given the technologically primitive nature of the handheld game machines sold before Game Boy's debut. While it may not hold up particularly well, it makes for a valuable historic artifact: A tentative baby step from the Game & Watch releases of the previous decade to the more elaborate software R&D1 and Intelligent Systems would be serving up within a year or two. Alleyway wasn't a great game, but only because its creators hadn't established yet for themselves how great the Game Boy could be.

Baseball

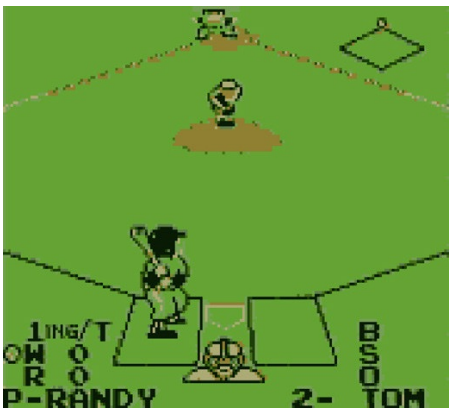
Japanese title: *Baseball* • ベースボール

Developer: Nintendo R&D1

Publisher: Nintendo

Release date: 4.21.1989 [JP] | 8.1989* [US] | 9.28.1990 [EU]

Super Game Boy: Enhanced color palette



Nintendo didn't launch the Game Boy in Europe until late 1990 – more than a year after

the Japanese and American launches. Unlike with consoles, power standards weren't the issue behind the delay; Nintendo didn't have to worry about reprogramming software for PAL/SECAM or dealing with 50Hz vs. 60Hz timing issues, because the Game Boy came with its own integral LCD screen that had nothing whatsoever to do with international broadcast standards. Nor did they need to worry about making a device designed for 110v/120v power run on 240v current, because the Game Boy's power was also integral: Four AA batteries. And batteries is batteries, no matter where you go.

No, the delay in Europe simply demonstrated Nintendo's lack of interest in that market. Japan and America were (and are) Nintendo's bread-and-butter, and Europe was a dim and distant side consideration. So in that light, of course one of the Game Boy's launch titles would be Baseball. Japan and America are the only countries in the world that genuinely care about baseball. It's our common language. Heck, Nintendo would even go on to buy their own team, the Seattle Mariners, a few years after Game Boy's debut.

As with Alleyway, we can pin much of Baseball's lack of ambition, interest, quality, or timelessness on its vintage. In portable video game terms, the launch wave of Game Boy titles fell into an ugly primal phase of evolution. They were the first fish to use their fins to get about on land. Someday, they would evolve into magnificent amphibians, but for that brief moment in history they simply flopped about grotesquely, splashing in the mud as they gasped for air.

To the game (or sports) enthusiast of 2015, Baseball doesn't offer much in the way of appeal. It may, in fact, have been the most primitive console-based take on the sport since Atari's Home Run for the 2600 more than a decade before its own debut. Now, nearly every baseball game plays largely the same, since it's based on a real-world sport with firm rules and mechanics. Play always alternates between the batting and pitching phases, with the former supplemented by the option to attempt base runs and the latter giving way to fielding whenever an opposing batter finds the ball. The difference between any two given baseball video games comes down to options and presentation, and Baseball has neither worth speaking of.

Baseball offers you a whopping two teams from which to choose, the choice of whether to play home or visiting team, and which of four characters you can field as your starting pitcher. Ah, and there's one other option: You can play Japan or USA mode. The only difference between the two is that distances are presented in meters rather than feet, and the batters have Japanese names instead of American. Not being familiar with Japanese sports figures circa 1989, I have no idea whether or not any of these are meant to be thinly veiled references to popular contemporary baseball players; but the team captains in the USA mode are Mario and Luigi (fulfilling Mario's contractual mandate for cameo appearances), so I'm not really sure why anyone wouldn't just play USA mode.

Pitching offers a very small amount of control: You slide right or left on the mound to determine the angle from which you make your throw, then press A once you're satisfied to enter the pitching stance. Holding up or down as you pitch the ball modifies the speed to become a slow pitch or fastball, respectively, and you can alter the curve of the ball's path by pressing left or right as it flies.

The batting mechanics are even more limited. You can move freely within the batter's

box and swing the bat, and… well, that's about it.

Still, batting feels like an embarrassment of opportunity and depth compared to fielding. Once your opponent hits the ball, you're better off just letting go of the controls and allowing your tiny men to attempt to field it automatically. They have a tendency to miss when you're playing against the CPU – the CPU, of course, doesn't suffer from this issue – but it's better than trying to guess where your fielders are relative to the ball. The camera view follows the ball, or more correctly follows the shadow of the ball, meaning that fielding often involves both the ball (which arcs upward at an impossible angle for a long hit) and your fielders drifting out of sight while the ball is in play. This was long before the idea of scaling graphics for camera zooms came into play for home consoles, and let's be honest: There's no way Game Boy's programmers could have reasonably pulled off that trick on day one anyway.

The end result is that the singleplayer mode in Baseball is utterly frustrating. The programming stacks things unreasonably in the CPU's favor, and even once you get the hang of the game's quirks, the sluggish pace of the action makes for a barely interactive experience. No, the only way to reasonably enjoy Baseball is to play with another person. Which was the point of the game, really: It was Nintendo's showcase piece for the Game Boy Link Cable. Playing against a friend doesn't fix Baseball's flaws, but it does help distribute them in an egalitarian fashion.

Of course, the inspiration for Baseball's design was… Baseball. That is, Nintendo's NES game. Released in 1984 in Japan for Famicom and 1985 at the U.S. launch of the NES, Baseball practically defined the Japanese console standard, aesthetically speaking, for 8-bit baseball games. Its chubby little characters would be repeated in other series like Pro Yakyuu Family Stadium (aka R.B.I. Baseball), and it basically represented a sort of minimal baseline for tolerable renditions of the sport in the Nintendo phase of the 8-bit era. By 1989, though, the baseball video game genre had evolved well beyond this primitive minimalism.

And yet, here we have Game Boy Baseball, which revisited the NES original and stripped it down even further. The NES game offered several more options for play than its Game Boy successor… not to mention things like color and a wider viewpoint thanks to the NES's superior pixel resolution.

Like Alleyway, Baseball doesn't include a staff roll or credits in the manual, and online resources alternately peg it as either an Intelligent Systems or Nintendo R&D1 venture, meaning it was probably a collaboration. The Intsys website lists it as part of their collective c.v., and given the game's similarity to the R&D1-developed NES Baseball, we can reasonably pin it down as a joint project between the two studios.

The real appeal of the game, of course, comes from the link play. For kids who picked up a Game Boy at the Japanese launch – not an insignificant number – Baseball was the Link Cable's killer app. Not a great rendition of baseball, sure, but somewhat more interesting than the old LED sports handsets, and a good excuse to link your system to a friend's. The superior Tennis would launch a month after Game Boy's debut, and Tetris less than a month after that… but for a few short weeks, Baseball was the bleeding edge of competitive portable game design.

And that fact alone makes Baseball a valuable part of video game history. We can look back from contemporary wi-fi-connected portable multiplayer experiences like Pokémon and Monster Hunter, and smile to think how far we've come in just 25 years.

Super Mario Land

Japanese title: *Super Mario Land* • スーパーマリオランド

Developer: Nintendo R&D1

Publisher: Nintendo

Release date: 4.21.1989 [JP] | 8.1989 [US] | 9.28.1990 [EU]

Super Game Boy: Enhanced color palette

Super Mario Land was the big release for Game Boy's launch – the can't-fail hit designed to move systems by the million right as the world was caught in Mario Mania's peak thrall – and that makes it a fascinating game on several levels.

For starters, unlike Game Boy's other launch titles, there's no ambiguity about who was behind this particular project. When you complete the game, you're treated to a full staff roll. Because we're talking about the olden days of six-man game development teams, it's not exactly a huge list of people – Super Mario Land has more "special thanks" credits than core dev credits. But you can see immediately that unlike the other launch games, Intelligent Systems had nothing to do with Mario. Strangely, though, neither did Shigeru Miyamoto's EAD team, the folks behind the Mario games for NES.

If you scope the game's credits via MobyGames, you'll find that not a single person who had worked on EAD's Super Mario titles up to 1989 contributed to Super Mario Land. Not only that, but several Mario Land team members had no game credits prior to Super Mario Land… though that doesn't necessarily mean they were complete newcomers

to the business. More likely they had worked anonymously on games that either lacked public-facing credits or else had served in a support role on other internal projects.

This has led some people to think of Super Mario Land as an impostor, some bootleg fake masquerading as a “real” Mario game, but no; nothing could be further from the truth. Look more closely at some of the game’s key staff and it becomes clear that they were Mario veterans, even if they didn’t contribute to Super Mario Bros. and its sequels. These are talented veterans all. Producer Gunpei Yokoi worked on Mario Bros., while director Satoru Okada worked on Wrecking Crew, along with Makoto Kanoh (credited with “special thanks” here). And composer Hirokazu “Hip” Tanaka had been involved with both games.

That’s a huge part of the Super Mario Land team with a claim to having taken part in the Mario legacy before Super Mario Bros. set the tone and direction for the franchise — men who had helped define the company’s direction for both Mario and the NES.

Remember that in Nintendo’s arcade days, there were no software development divisions; everything was simply Research & Development 1. Nintendo’s EAD (Entertainment Analysis & Development) group – specifically created for key creative leads Shigeru Miyamoto and Takashi Tezuka – came into being in 1983, around the time of the Famicom’s launch in Japan. EAD would create several of the medium’s definitive works like The Legend of Zelda and, of course, Super Mario Bros. Before Mario went Super, though, R&D1 continued to create and contribute to Famicom and arcade games featuring the character despite the EAD and Miyamoto having split off.

In that sense, Super Mario Land represented several Mario veterans returning to a franchise to which they had a personal stake, but whose nature had changed radically in the five years since their last contribution to the series. That’s OK, though; R&D1 had defined itself quite nicely in the interim as well, becoming the home of Nintendo’s more cutting-edge designers. If EAD and Miyamoto were all about polish and impeccable design, R&D1 was about throwing any and everything to the wall and creating surprising, if not always entirely refined, results.

Super Mario Land embodies that difference in temperament. It’s definitely not the work of the people who made Super Mario Bros. 3. The physics aren’t quite right, the enemies and settings are unlike those of any other Mario game, and it incorporates mechanics that appear nowhere else in the Mario games. Two of the game’s 12 stages play out as sidescrolling shooters, for crying out loud. By while it may not have the ring of pure authenticity, it really is a masterful little game.

Unlike the other Game Boy launch titles, Super Mario Land requires no excuses. This is not a game that was only sort-of fun for a limited window of time a quarter-century ago.

It plays well today, even if it does come in a bit on the short and easy side of things. While Baseball and Alleyway stood out strictly by virtue of existing – wow, handheld video games! – Super Mario Land can give a good percentage of NES platformers from 1985-1989 a run for their money. Is it as vast, polished, and brilliant as Super Mario Bros. 3? Well, no. But then again, what in 1989 was? Super Mario Land disappoints only when you hold it side-by-side with what may be the single greatest 8-bit game ever made; by that standard, every game of the era was a letdown. If Super Mario Land is a poor game, you might as well burn the whole thing to the ground. Speaking of Super Mario Bros. 3, another curiosity of Super Mario Land‘s timing (borne of the vagaries of international releases in the 8-bit era) comes from the very different place it took in Mario’s Japanese chronology versus in the U.S. In Japan, Super Mario Land simply followed on the heels of the NES Mario trilogy: Super Mario Bros. debuted in 1985, its sequel (known in the U.S. as The Lost Levels) in 1986, and Super Mario Bros. 3 arrived late in 1988. To Japanese fans, Mario’s evolution had been a straightforward one, with play mechanics descended directly from Super Mario Bros. In America, however, the timeline split after Super Mario Bros. arrived in 1985 as part of the test market launch for the shiny new NES. Our Super Mario Bros. 2 was a sprite hack of a game totally unrelated to Mario (Yume Koujou: Doki Doki Panic), and launched late in 1988 – about half a year before Super Mario Land arrived in the U.S. alongside the Game Boy. Meanwhile, Super Mario Bros. 3 wouldn’t arrive in the West until 1990, nearly a year after Super Mario Land. We didn’t even get Fred Savage’s 90-minute Super Mario Bros. 3 preview/commercial The Wizarduntil half a year after Game Boy debuted. So the American Mario experience was a chimerical and unpredictable one, with the direct linear style of Super Mario Bros. giving way to the surreal free-running of the impostor Super Mario Bros. 2.

What makes Super Mario Land so interesting is that it worked as a logical extension of both heritages. Maybe it felt slightly odd for Japanese gamers, and technically represented a step or two backward from Super Mario Bros. 3, but it definitely worked as a continuation of the linear, athletic Mario tradition seen in the Famicom trilogy. In America, though, Mario was all about changing the rules from one game to another, and Super Mario Land did that, too. It wound the clock back to take on a more linear feel akin to Super Mario Bros., yes, but all the rules were different. Enemies behaved differently, as did weapons. And the Egyptian/Easter Island feel of Sarasaland didn’t feel so out of keeping with Super Mario Bros. 2 and its Arabian Nights motif. Despite how differently Mario’s history unfolded in America and Japan, Super Mario Land slotted into mid-1989 quite neatly.

Over and above all other considerations, Super Mario Land feels like a full-on Mario game. At 12 stages long, it’s admittedly shorter than any other entry in the series – only the American Super Mario Bros. 2 compares, at 20 stages… though those stages were larger and beefier and Super Mario Land‘s. In terms of content, design, and feel, however, it feels totally legit. Dozens of Mario imitators burst into being in the wake of the phenomenal success of Super Mario Bros., and most of them felt like shoddy, off-brand bootlegs. Despite some minor physics and control quibbles, though, this was no slapdash effort. The fact that it worked so well on the tiny, limited Game Boy made its authenticity even more impressive.

Structurally, Super Mario Land mimics the

general feel of the NES games in a more compact form, presenting you with four worlds to conquer, each containing three levels apiece. Every world offers a different theme – Egyptian, tropical, Easter Island, and China – and there's a curious alien motif running through the adventure. Mario evidently travels by UFO to get from world to world, and the final boss, Tatanga, attacks by means of his own space ship.

Unlike "real" Mario games, Mario Land takes place in the kingdom of Sarasaland, whose ruler Princess Daisy has been kidnapped. And, yeah, every time you beat one of the first three bosses, it turns out you've rescued a creature masquerading as Daisy with dark magic. It plays an awful lot like the original Super Mario Bros. in a lot of ways, in other words.

But then you start paying attention to the little details. The fire flower has been replaced with a completely different kind of flower that gives you the ability to throw a bouncing "Super Ball" that rebounds around the screen for several seconds rather than simply skipping along the ground straight ahead of you. Koopa Troopas are replaced by Nokobons, turtles who respond to being stepped on by exploding. Bullet Bill blasters behave like Piranha Plants, emerging from pipes to take shots at you when you least expect it. 1UP Mushrooms have vanished entirely, replaced with little hearts that serve the same purpose. And at the end of each stage, you can take an alternate exit that whisks you to a bonus mini game where you can net as many as three extra lives.

And then there are the new enemies. The bad guys in Super Mario Land demonstrate much greater variety – thematic variety at that – than in standard Mario titles. Thuggish Moai heads run toward you in the Easter Island-themed levels; indestructible kyonshi hop after you in the China-like regions. There are giant hairy spiders that feel more like they should be in a Castlevania game than Mario… but then there the Fighter Flies, critters from Mario Bros. that had yet to make their way into Miyamoto's "proper" Mario universe.

Inexplicably, Nintendo of America didn't bother localizing enemy names for the U.S. Even standard, familiar Mario foes keep their Japanese names here – Piranha Plants, for example, are listed as "Pakkun Flower" in the manual. Not even the variants on old favorites get Americanized monikers. You'd think they could have come up with interesting puns for Chibibos (tiny Goombas – chibi Kuribos) and Nokobons (exploding Koopa Troopas — Nokonoko bombs), but no. Instead of making the production seem cut-rate, though, these localization choices (or nonchoices) simply serve to make Sarasaland feel all the more bizarre.

Thankfully, Mario Land doesn't cut corners where it counts; not only are controls surprisingly on-point given the scaled-down production, the levels display smart design as well. You'll find hidden blocks in the places where your Mario instincts tell you they should be. Power-ups in later levels often force you to make classic risk-reward choices, potentially placing you in immediate danger if you chase after them recklessly. The routes to the bonus games at the end of each stage become increasingly tricky to navigate. Enemies appear in challenging but fair locations.

But of course, that's to be expected. Even if this wasn't a Miyamoto/EAD production, it was hardly amateur hour. Mario Land is the work of veteran game designers, and while Okada and his team may have brought their own distinct temperament to this game (which would eventually mutate through sequels and spin-offs into the marvelously bizarre WarioWare, Inc. and Rhythm Heaven), they also brought experience and expertise to the table. Mario Land represents a different take on Mario, to be sure, yet it's absolutely a valid take – and an entertaining one.

Perhaps no feature of the game better represents Mario Land's willingness to do and be its own thing than the mechanical shift in stages 2-3 and 4-3. For those levels, the game turns into a side-scrolling shooter as Mario takes to a submarine and, later, an airplane. Though these levels aren't exactly hardcore bullet hell (in fact they're quite simple and limited), they're a fun change of pace that hearkens back to Mario's early days in the arcade, when he was a malleable everyman rather than a mascot dropping by to sell unrelated games with desultory cameos. The final battle even takes the form of a shootout with two consecutive bosses rather than forcing you to take on Tatanga with platforming alone. And that, I think, is the key to Super Mario Land's success; yes, it feels dated compared to the wonders of Super Mario Bros. 3, but it's not primitive. Rather, it's primal. It calls back to Mario's origins, offering a holistic take on the character in a compact handheld form.

And despite being handheld, coming on the heels of primitive LCD games and launching alongside barely enjoyable blips of entertainment like Alleyway and Baseball, it feels fully realized. Colorize the game and scale up the graphics and it would have been one of the best NES platformers of the system's middle life. Quality shines through regardless of tech, and Super Mario Land has quality to spare. Again, it's only in comparison to the NES Mario games and its own direct sequels that it feels relatively lackluster. But in 1989? This was the Sistine Chapel of handheld games, and it set a high bar of quality that few games would come close to matching throughout Game Boy's first year of existence.

PACKAGING: JAPAN VS. U.S.

Following on from the relationship between Famicom and NES packaging, Game Boy releases shipped in very different game boxes in Japan and the West. Japan's boxes were slim, compact, barely larger than the cartridges they contained; American and European boxes were thicker and larger in every dimension. Western boxes also came in a more universally standardized format, with a wide faux-brushed-metal strip running the length of the left side, prominently displaying the Game Boy system logo.

Of course, Nintendo had flirted with standardized box designs for as long as they'd been in the console business: The original Famicom game boxes came in the "pulse" boxes, as iconic to Japanese gamers as "black box" NES games are to Americans. Plenty of third parties used their own standardized branding, too, from Namcot's oversized plastic clamshell Famicom boxes to Konami's beautiful silver-trimmed NES packaging. But the U.S. Game Boy launch marked Nintendo's first use of a single design style that spanned the entire product line for all licensees, a practice that would be echoed in the ugly American Super NES and Nintendo 64 boxes and eventually for all portable Nintendo platforms.

In Japan, however, only box sizes were determined by regulation — and even that would begin to vary before long, with second-wave releases like Sa•Ga 2 coming in oversized boxes that would eventually become more or less a new standard for the Game Boy line.

Western and Japanese packaging also differed considerably in style. While a few 1989 releases carried over the same art between territories — notably Super Mario Land and Castlevania: The Adventure — box art was more likely than not to be revamped completely in translation, shedding the cute cartoon look common to Japanese packaging in favor of photographs or "realistic" airbrushed images. Even games that maintained a cartoonish look in the West, such as Boomer's Adventure in Asmik Land, found themselves redesigned to a certain extent in order to better fit the needs of the American market (or at least needs as perceived by game publishers.)

Even manuals varied between regions. Both American and Japanese Game Boy

manuals were roughly the same dimensions, but Japanese manuals read in portrait format, with staples and spine along the lengthier edge. American manuals, on the other hand, were printed in landscape format, stapled along the shorter edge. Not surprisingly, Japanese manuals were more likely to be in full color… though Game Boy's era being an age of physical packaging, the sheer amount of *stuff* (from posters to ads to safety cards) contained in Game Boy releases in all regions feels like an embarassment of riches compared to today's parsimonious nothings.

YAKUMAN

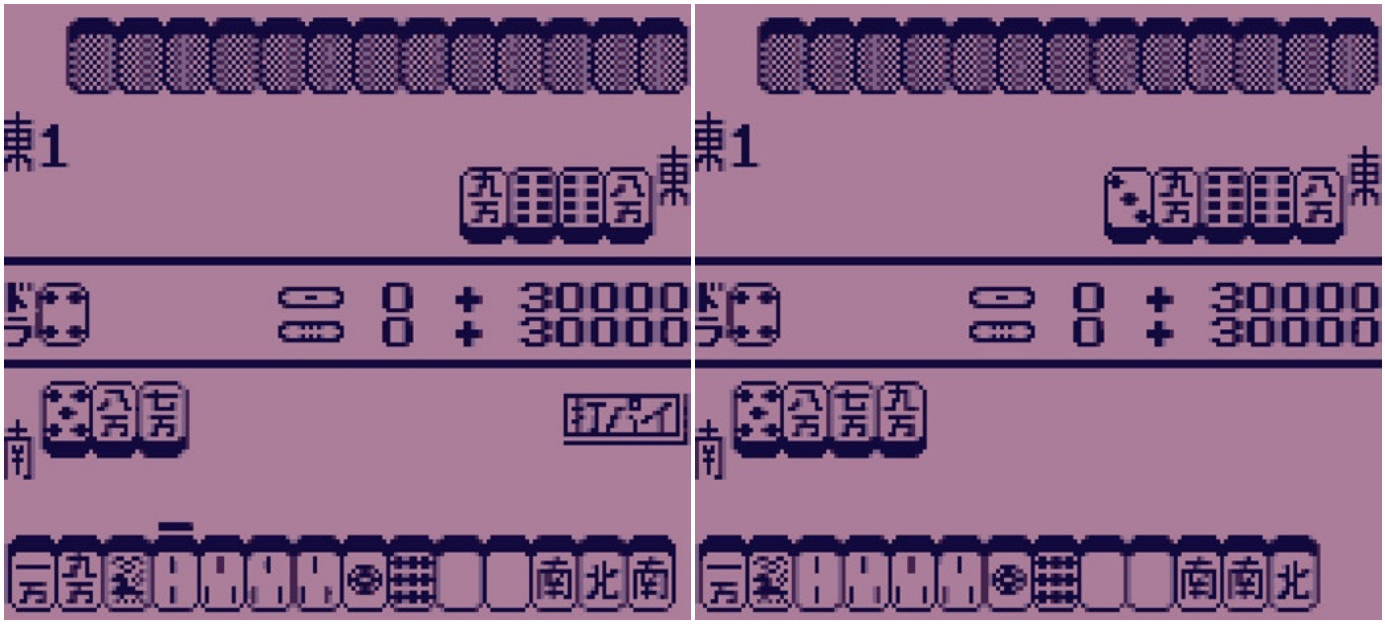
Japanese title: *Yakuman* • 役満

Developer: Nintendo R&D1/Intelligent Systems

Publisher: Nintendo

Release date: 4.21.1989 [JP only]

Super Game Boy: Enhanced color palette



When Game Boy launched in Japan, it arrived with four games (each sold separately, of course). Most of them made their way to the West – as did the overwhelming majority of game releases from Game Boy's first year of existence, for that matter – with one notable exception: Yakuman.

Yakuman's failure to venture beyond Japanese shores doesn't require much explanation, though. It's just that it would have been financial suicide. Yakuman would have been lucky to achieve triple-digit sales figures in the U.S. After all, Americans aren't exactly clamoring for Japanese-style mahjong games.

Mahjong is a very old and very complex Chinese tabletop game, loosely similar to poker or euchre in its focus on matching combinations of suites and values, but faster… and louder, thanks to its use of small, hard tiles instead of cards. Japanese mahjong, much like the Japanese alphabet, takes a Chinese tradition and adds all kinds of new variants to it, modifying it to the point that it's barely recognizable. It's an incredibly popular pastime in Japan, but as you might expect it doesn't exactly inspire massive tournaments in the West.

Mahjong games have been a mainstay of Japanese consoles since the Famicom first exploded into popularity, and they were popping up en masse on Japanese home computers long before that. So Yakuman's existence should hardly be a surprise – it simply had the distinction of being the first of many mahjong games that would appear on Game Boy through the years.

Despite the genre's pervasiveness, first-party Nintendo mahjong games are hardly the norm. They've only published a handful over the years. Yakuman is not, however, the first mahjong game Nintendo had ever produced.

Several years before Game Boy came into being, Nintendo produced a dedicated mahjong handheld that went by the name Yakuman. A high-end variant on the Game & Watch line, Yakuman had a unique design, looking almost like a large multipurpose ruler with a built-in LCD screen, or perhaps a bizarrely oblong calculator. Its extremely widescreen design was a necessity to accommodate the game's standard side-byside arrangement of active tiles. Interestingly, because the game's tiles bear a wide variety of symbols and markings, the original Yakuman didn't employ the Game & Watch series' distinct silkscreened, illustrated graphics but instead presented its playing pieces with an LCD pixel grid like Game Boy would use.

The unique design and tech of the Yakuman standalone made for a capable but pricey piece of gaming hardware. It also made a compelling case for Game Boy: At a retail price of ¥16800, the standalone was only slightly less expensive than the Game Boy hardware (¥12500) and a copy of the new Yakuman cartridge (¥4900) combined. Not only that, but the Game Boy's comparatively high-resolution screen and link cable made possible a much more detailed playing field.

About the only thing Yakuman Game Boy couldn't offer over its predecessor was a better interface; where the standalone incorporated a large array of buttons for fast, precise tile selection, the Game Boy version forced players to scroll methodically through their rows of tiles and modifiers, making for a much slower experience than real mahjong… though this is a standard compromise for video mahjong and can hardly count as a mark

against Yakuman for Game Boy.

Yakuman has largely been forgotten and probably would have vanished beneath the waves of obscurity long ago if not for the novelty of its being a launch title for the bestselling game system of the 20th century. And yet it holds an important place in the Game Boy's legacy over and above simply having been present on day one. Yakuman signified Nintendo's determination to make the Game Boy a success with adults as well as children.

Mahjong holds roughly the same place in Japanese culture that Texas Hold-em does in America: It's a lively social game, often played for money, with an intensely competitive element that lends itself to tournament play. It also isn't a game for kids. Not that kids can't play, but realistically they wouldn't want to, any more than most American kids would want to play cutthroat poker. Give a Japanese schoolboy a choice between playing a mahjong sim or Super Mario Land he'll go for Mario every time.

On the other hand, a middle-aged commuter on the Yamanote line doesn't want to fuss with a twitchy platformer in the bustling rush-hour crowd. But a sedate, turnbased time-killer based on the parlor game she plays with her friends on weekends? Perfection. Nintendo's handheld gaming business was inspired by salarymen messing with gadgets to kill time during the daily commute, and Game Boy embraced that element of its heritage.

Nintendo marketed Game Boy to older audiences straightaway, but marketing only goes so far. Yakuman introduced the other half of the Game Boy equation, making it the first game system designed as much for adults as children. It has the distinction of being the first mahjong game to appear at the launch of any console. Famicom Disk System (1986) had one, but that was an expansion for an existing system, which already had an entrenched player base. And PC Engine (1987) had Shanghai at launch, but that doesn't really count despite its use of mahjong tiles.

As mahjong games go, Yakuman seems to be on par with contemporary console mahjong adaptations – aside from its lack of color graphics, of course. I freely admit I don't understand mahjong (that's something I'll be picking up in the course of the Game Boy World project), but the game seems straightforward enough. You can choose the number of players, your AI-controlled opponents, and specific rule variants and options. Play advances by alternating turns in which you select tiles one at a time and, when possible, apply special conditions to your play. Play continues with money changing hands after each round until one player's pot of ¥30000 ($300, more or less) is depleted.

Given its simplicity and limitations, I can't imagine that Yakuman is a game that mahjong fans feel compelled to return to. I guess it's possible that it's the mahjong equivalent of Game Boy Tetris, the gold standard for the genre despite its primitive appearance… but somehow I rather doubt it. Like its fellow Intelligent Systems-designed Game Boy launch titles, Yakuman got by on novelty and mild-mannered competence, but it lacked the ambition of a true Game Boy classic.

Tennis

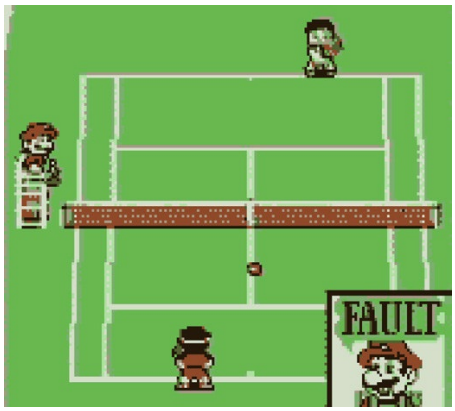
Japanese title: *Tennis* • テニス

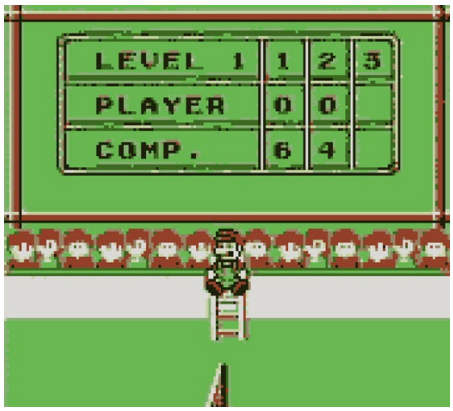
Developer: Nintendo R&D1

Publisher: Nintendo

Release date: 5.29.1989 [JP] | 8.1989 [US] | 9.28.1990 [EU]

Super Game Boy: Enhanced color palette





Nintendo is not simply some monolithic entity when it comes to the actual creation of games. There is no slab-like “Nintendo” object that stamps out games on an assembly line. (Also, no: Shigeru Miyamoto doesn’t singlehandedly invent every idea to issue forth from the company’s walls.) Through the years, Nintendo’s innards have shuffled around, with teams and larger divisions alike shuffling back and forth, dividing, merging, and reconfiguring themselves to best take on the challenges of game design.

Knowing this, I think, is important to getting a better sense of the oddly generic games that emerged in both the early days of the Famicom and the Game Boy alike. You know, all those crisp, functional, simple sports games whose titles consisted of the name of the sport contained within: Baseball, Golf, Tennis, Volleyball, Ice Hockey, etc. There was no single “Nintendo” responsible for those games, despite their similarities of aesthetics and scope. They were developed by different internal and second-party studios, often in conjunction – as with most of the Game Boy’s launch-day release, which represented joint collaboration between Intelligent Systems and R&D1.

By most accounts, “Intelligent Systems” originally just meant a single man: Tohru Narahiro, a skilled programmer who frequently did the nuts-and-bolts work for R&D1’s games. You may know Narahiro’s name from Metroid; some speculate the famous “NARPAS SWORD” code was created as his personal debugging tool as he programmed the NES adaptation of the game (NAR PASSWORD, or “Narahiro’s password”). R&D1 would come up with the cool ideas, and he’d give them flesh and form, so to speak. Eventually, Intelligent Systems became its own legitimate entity complete with its own designers and artists; these days, it plays such a key role internally at Nintendo that the division was recently given its own fancy building.

Around the Game Boy’s launch, however, Intelligent Systems was still bulking up, having only just created its first truly Intelligent Systems-ish game a year prior (Famicom Wars, precursor to Advance Wars). This transitional state probably accounts for why some of the system’s launch titles were codeveloped by R&D1 and Intelligent Systems while others were built entirely by R&D1 (or, if not by R&D1 alone, then perhaps designed in collaboration with an uncredited external studio. Such was the ambiguity and uncertainty of gaming’s olden days, when no one felt the need to credit people for their hard work).

In any case, Game Boy Tennis turned out to be one of the games that R&D1 made without Intelligent Systems – which, perhaps, is why it didn’t quite make Game Boy’s Japanese launch date, arriving instead about five weeks later. This could also explain why, even though it clearly was designed atop the framework of NES Tennis, it feels much less like its dusty old console predecessor than Baseball did.

Intelligent Systems helped create NES Tennis, but they didn’t work on the Game Boy version. But going by their website, Narahiro had nothing to do with NES Baseball, yet Intelligent Systems collaborated on that remake for Game Boy. So the dated feel of Baseball is not simply a matter of Intelligent Systems dredging up its old code or something. But the fact remains that Game Boy Baseball, like all the other early Game Boy launch titles co-developed by Intelligent Systems, felt stodgy and conservative; whereas Tennis, evidently an R&D1 solo joint, feels much more contemporary to 1989.

Tennis quite likely changed out of necessity. The NES game included a doubles mode,

which seemingly would have been too demanding for Game Boy (or at least for programmers to handle in its early days, when they were still learning the ins and outs of the hardware). The system suffered from several limitations, and having four moving characters on the screen at once may have been beyond the system's capabilities there at the start. Considering the conservative design of the launch-day titles – even Mario Land featured such tiny sprites – doubles mode probably had to be dropped for reasons of practicality.

Thankfully, the designers made up for it by putting the Link Cable to use. While two players couldn't cooperate, they could compete – and unlike other video game renditions of tennis, both could enjoy a behindthe-court viewpoint, since each player had his own individual screen rather than sharing a single perspective.

Tennis made up for the loss of cooperative play in other ways, too. Without question, it's the smoothest, most artful game we've seen to date. The characters are appealingly round and animate nicely; the action moves quickly, and the ball moves and scales smoothly as you swat it back and forth. Even Mario, putting in his obligatory cameo, looks much nicer than he did on NES. Of course, the usual caveats apply. The head-to-head mode remains a lot of fun even now, but as with Baseball, the computer is a monster in single-player mode. Expect no quarter, even on easiest difficulty. It has an uncanny knack for always serving perfectly, always being where you hit the ball, and always demonstrating incredible control over its serves and volleys that far exceed the bounds of mere mortal flesh.

But oh well. That's sports games for you: The computer is either idiotically easy or infuriatingly competent. Despite the inherent foibles of its genre, Tennis serves up a quality sports experience and surpasses its source material on some levels even as it slips behind in others. Portable gaming is about mitigating compromise, and Tennis demonstrates R&D1's keen eye for knowing where to make those concessions to necessity.

Unlike the Game Boy's launch sports titles, Tennis feels like something more substantial than a halfhearted NES port running on underpowered hardware… and it feels more visually ambitious than a glorified Game & Watch, too. I can't imagine anyone ever wanting to revisit Baseball in this day and age… but Tennis? Color limitations aside, it holds up quite nicely.

But don't think too badly of Intelligent Systems – they may not have impressed with Game Boy's early action-y type games, but they'd soon establish themselves as Nintendo's RPG and strategy experts.

Tetris

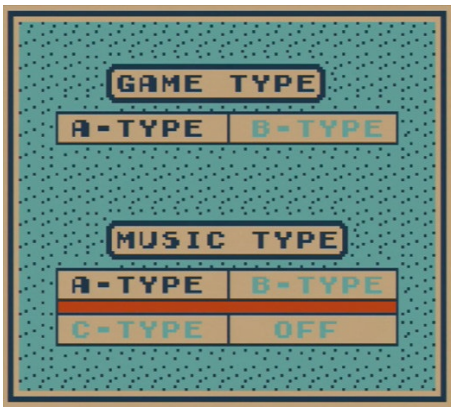
Japanese title: *Tetris* • テトリス

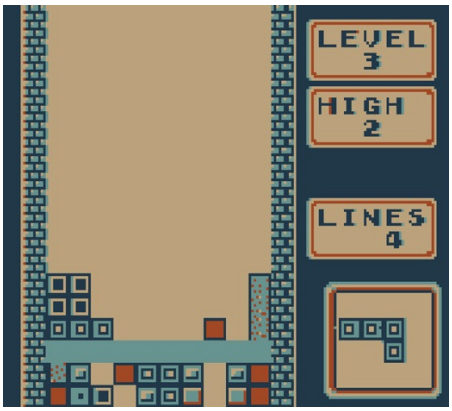
Developer: Bullet Proof Software/Nintendo R&D1

Publisher: Nintendo

Release date: 6.14.1989 [JP] | 8.1989* [US] | 9.28.1990 [EU]

Super Game Boy: Enhanced color palette





Has any game ever defined a platform so clearly as Tetris? Wii Sports, probably. Possibly Halo. But Tetris didn’t merely move systems – though it certainly did that – it established

the tone and style of the Game Boy. Until Pokémon came along, Tetris served as the Game Boy's statement of intent.

Game Boy Tetris carries several levels of significance. There are the politics and history of the game, of course; Tetris was a massive coup for Nintendo, and locking down the exclusive handheld rights to the game probably did nearly as much to give it an edge over Lynx and Game Gear as price and battery life did. Klax and Columns were nice and all, but they weren't Tetris. Neither were Nintendo-exclusive puzzlers like Dr. Mario or Hatris, for what it's worth – but that didn't matter. Nintendo had Tetris, and everything else seemed secondary.

In the U.S. and Europe, Tetris came packed in with the system for much of the Game Boy's life. In Japan, however, the handheld came bare, without a free game. That's par for the course in Japan, actually, but even if Nintendo had wanted to include Tetris with the system, the timing wouldn't have worked out; Tetris didn't launch until nearly two months after Game Boy over there.

I can't speak to the Japanese reaction to Tetris, but I can only assume it was positive based on the fact that it sold more than four million units over there, making it the best-selling title for the original Game Boy in Japan save Pokémon Red and Green. And that's without it being a pack-in, meaning consumers actively sought it out.

In America, though, Tetris literally sold systems. In the early days of the machine's life, most store displays for Game Boy simply consisted of a single mounted unit running Tetris. It served the task perfectly: It's one of the rare games whose appeal communicates immediately, even in a crowded and noisy electronics department. And that same instant appeal served it well as a portable game. Just as you could find yourself entertained by a two-minute demo in the camera department of Montgomery Wards or Best Products, so too could you switch on Tetris to kill a few minutes here or there.

Tetris's abstract visuals, intuitive play, and gently ascending difficulty curve created a play experience that transcended age, gender, race, nationality, or skill. Game Boy probably would have been a hit regardless of what game came included in the box, as its success in Japan demonstrated. But with Tetris in tow, it became a monster.

Tetris becomes all the more fascinating when you know the story behind the game. It's not as though Nintendo simply invented it out of thin air just in time for Game Boy; on the contrary, Tetris was four or five years old by the time it went portable. It had already appeared on several platforms in the U.S., including personal computers, standalone arcade units, and even the NES.

However, there was considerable debate over the legitimacy of several of those versions (particularly the original NES port) due to the peculiar origins of the game. Where most games came from Japanese, American, or European corporations dedicated to the business of making money off video games, Tetris had been designed by a Russian computer engineer named Alexey Pajitnov.

Pajitnov developed Tetris on a state-owned computer in a state-owned lab, a situation that can make for tricky rights issues under the best of circumstances. Sovietera Russia, however, made it even more complicated – even in the relatively lenient Gorbachev era, at the cusp of perestroika and glasnost, the rights issues surrounding Tetris were perilous

indeed. Nintendo was no stranger to licensing confusion, as the home rights to Donkey Kong had been a matter of some significance in the early ’80s console race, but this was a matter on a completely different level.

Ultimately, Henk Rogers of Bullet Proof Software managed to lock down the proper rights to Tetris (both for consoles and handhelds) for Nintendo’s benefit. Rogers was perhaps the ideal man for the job: A Dutch programmer who had waded into the Japanese market early on and helped establish the computer role-playing genre as a national addiction with his Wizardry-alike maze crawler The Black Onyx. Clearly he had no fear when it came to navigating the challenges of computer gaming in unfamiliar lands, and he collaborated with Nintendo to sort out the legal ins and outs of Tetris‘ rights – much to the detriment of Atari, who had already been distributing Tetris both for the arcade and for NES under the auspices of their Tengen thirdparty division.

Tetris would have fared well for itself on the strength of its gameplay alone, but Nintendo got behind the game in a big way. They contracted with Rogers’ Bullet Proof Software to develop both NES and Game Boy renditions of the game (the latter, unsurprisingly, in conjunction with R&D1). They pushed the NES version heavily through advertising and through their company magazine, Nintendo Power. But for Game Boy, they went the extra mile and simply stuck the game in the box with the system.

Nintendo sacrificed some easy money on the U.S. pack-in; the system with game cost $89 in the U.S., whereas the system alone cost Japanese consumers ¥12500, roughly $95 at the time — and it didn’t even include the headphones. But given that Tetris helped move roughly nine million units in the system’s first three years of life in America alone, I can’t imagine Nintendo felt too badly about the slimmer profit margins.

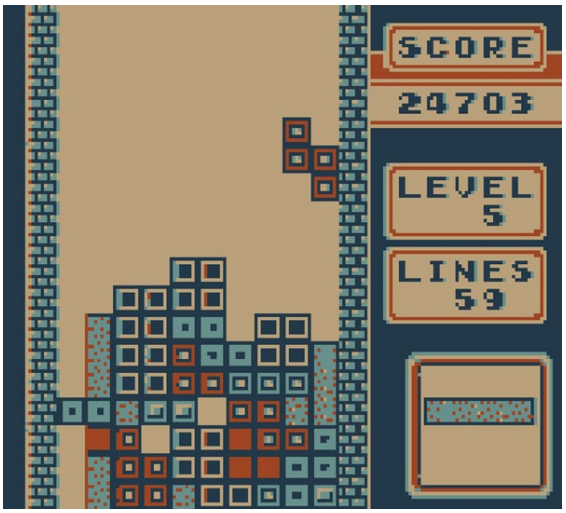
And what of Tetris itself? At this point, the game itself requires practically no explanation. It’s practically hard-wired into our DNA. Players guide falling blocks as they drop into a deep well, trying arrange the pieces in such a way as to cause the blocks to create uninterrupted rows spanning the entirety of the well. The pieces come in seven different arrangements of four squares, effectively representing every possible permutation of four contiguous squares. Unbroken horizontal lines vanish once the pieces settle, causing all pieces above that line to shift downward to fill the gaps. A “tetris” is the game’s most impressive feat: Clearing four horizontal lines at once.

Tetris‘ particulars vary from rendition to rendition (infinite spin, naïve gravity, etc.), but by and large the experience is essentially the same regardless of the platform it appears on. The simplicity and universality of Tetris serve it well, and that was especially true of the Game Boy version.

Pajitnov’s original version of Tetris ran on a Russian VAX-style terminal called the Electronika 60, a system incapable of generating bitmap-style graphics. Tetris originally worked entirely with ASCII (or, well, Cyrillic Unicode, I suppose), with the blocks originally represented by means of square

brackets or escape characters. It literally will play on any device capable of generating a 10×20 grid – and you could probably even make it work on the 16×16 screen of the Milton Bradley Microvision.

Other versions of Tetris offered great bells and whistles absent in the Game Boy release: The Atari arcade version featured high-resolution head-to-head graphics, while Nintendo's NES rendition gave the playing field an appealingly candy-like patina of color. And yet, many people will argue that the game has never been better than in that original Game Boy version.



Despite the small screen dimensions (Game Boy's resolution topped out at 160×144 pixels, a fraction of the NES' 256×244 and barely more than a quarter of the 320×240 offered on Sega's impressive new Genesis) and the four-shade monochrome graphics, Tetris looked and played great on Game Boy. The graphical limitations didn't matter, thanks to excellent use of contrast; the pieces stood out, with just enough variety in their shading that you could catch the next piece display out of the corner of your eye and it would "read" flawlessly even without the color-coding of arcade, PC, and console version. And while it lacked the hi-rez head-to-head format of Atari and Tengen's versions, it still managed to incorporate multiplayer the same way as Baseball and Tennis: Through the Link Cable.

Compared to contemporary renditions of Tetris, the Game Boy release may seem a bit light on features, but its two play modes complemented one another nicely. For longer sessions, Game A offered a traditional take on the game, with blocks falling into an empty well and accelerating for every 10 lines cleared. Game B, on the other hand, worked well for quick sessions; it filled the screen with a player-determined amount of clutter and challenged players to clear away the existing blocks or erase 25 lines.

Whether for long or short sessions, any time, any place, Tetris made a perfect fit for the Game Boy platform. It matched nicely with Nintendo's sale pitch to older players, and the decidedly neutral visual style of the game worked for any age. It was artful enough to entice younger eyes, but stolid enough not to turn off adults. A truly universal play experience that helped Game Boy transcend the seeming limitations of its name.

The Game Boy would see tons of games in the Tetris style, especially in its first few years – not just falling-block puzzles, but single-screen games mixing mental and finger dexterity. No doubt those games would have appeared on the system regardless, given their suitability for the platform. But Tetris surely accelerated their appearance, just as it accelerated Game Boy sales.

I don't know that it would be possible to properly gauge the impact of Tetris on Game Boy's sales, since the game appeared at or near launch in every territory. But really, what the point of even attempting that little mental exercise? The fact is, Game Boy and Tetris made a perfect match; that it played such a key role in the system's launch means it's

simply an inextricable part of the Game Boy story. Despite all the maneuvers that went on behind the scenes to make it happen, the important thing is that it did in fact happen – and Game Boy rode the crest of Tetris fever to success.

Developers and publishers

All told, more than a dozen developers working for nearly as many different publishers contributed to Game Boy in its first year of life. That more than anything shows how both the games industry and Nintendo's star powered had grown over the course of the decade; when Nintendo launched the Famicom back in 1983, it was the sole developer and publisher for the first year of the system's life.

By 1989, however, a number of companies had made their fortune by exploting the Famicom bubble, and they wanted in on the ground floor for Nintendo's next big thing. Few of Nintendo's most prolific Famicom and NES collaborators didn't show up on Game Boy right at launch. Capcom was definitely the biggest — their debut would come in May of 1990 — and NES development wunderkind Rare (along with publishing partner Acclaim) barely missed the mark: Wizards & Warriors X, Rare and Acclaim's first project and the first Western-developed Game Boy work, would launch in January of 1990. Here's a breakdown of the NES legacy behind Game Boy's first year of development talent:

- **Nintendo R&D1:** The creators of the Game Boy system and Nintendo's "legacy" studio, R&D1 had worked on everything from Donkey Kong to the NES launch lineup to Metroid and Kid Icarus.
- **Intelligent Systems:** Effectively a Nintendo second party, IS was fairly young in 1989 but had already kicked off its first major franchise: Famicom Wars.
- **Bullet Proof Software:** BPS had only developed a few games for Nintendo, but they were doozies: Tetris and legendary RPG The Black Onyx.
- **HAL:** Not quite yet an exclusive Nintendo collaborato, the house that Iwata built had already produced some memorable works, including The Adventures of Lolo.
- **Atelier Double:** A number of Famicom conversions of Western PC titles like Winter Games and The Bard's Tale.
- **Kotobuki System:** Licensed material, like Superman and Crazy Castle progenitor Roger Rabbit.
- **Konami:** Where would NES be without Konami, the creators of Gradius, Castlevania, Contra, and so much more?
- **TOSE:** What hadn't TOSE worked on? They were the ghost house behind more than 100 Famicom and NES games.
- **Tokyo Shoseki:** Lots of "educational" Famicom apps, and somehow also a port of Falcom's Romancia.
- **Atlus:** While they'd helped Namcot with the original Megami Tensei, it wasn't yet the series we know today. At the time, Atlus mostly paid its bills with contract work on games like Jaws and Friday the 13th.
- **Marionette:** Pachinko all the way.
- **Squaresoft:** After a dire series of Disk Original Group releases, Square had only recently found success with 1987's Final Fantasy.
- **Pony Canyon:** Fuji's publishing arm had mostly focused on MSX releases, but their mediocrity had graced Famicom as well with games like Rambo and Ultima.
- **Shouei System:** Anime licenses, including several Fist of the North Star games.
- **Seta:** Japan-only board games and janky action titles like 8 Eye's.
- **Asmik:** Something of a newcomer, Asmik hit the ground running for every platform:

Not just NES and Game Boy, but Genesis and TurboGraFX-16, too.

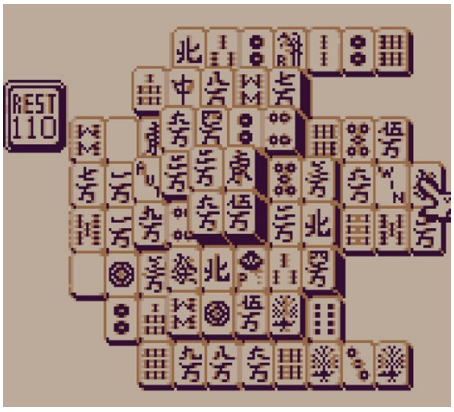
SHANGHAI

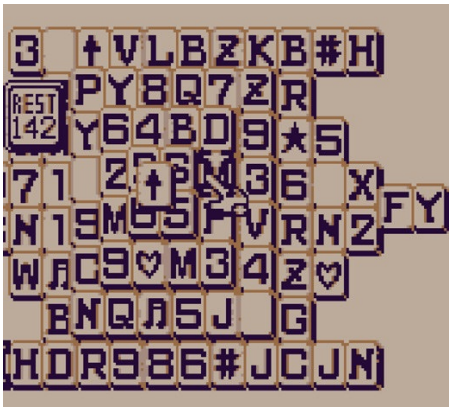
Japanese title: *Shanghai* • 上海

Developer: Activision/HAL Laboratory

Publisher: HAL Laboratory

Release date: 7.28.1989 [JP] | 6.1990 [US]





It took a couple of months, but we finally have the first third-party release for Game Boy… though only just barely. These days, Shanghai publisher HAL Laboratory is more a

Nintendo second party studio akin to Intelligent Systems than a true third party, but the company's relationship with Nintendo was still evolving back in 1989. And while that particular relationship dates back to at least 1984 (when HAL programmer and future NCL president Satoru Iwata stepped in to help fix up the NES version of Balloon Fight), throughout the '80s HAL published under its own label: Air Fortress, Adventures of Lolo, Kabuki Quantum Fighter, and so forth.

That would change as HAL became more closely integrated with Nintendo's internal development teams. In fact, significant developments in the companies' relationship were brewing even as Shanghai saw the light of day; the same day as Shanghai's debut, a major HAL/Nintendo collaboration (Mother, AKA Earth Bound) hit store shelves. So really, it's only fitting that the first external company whose name appeared on the cover of a Game Boy release would eventually become folded into Nintendo. No credits appear in Shanghai, but it is entirely possible that this early Game Boy title features contributions by Nintendo's future boss.

Surprisingly, this seventh Game Boy release looks at first glance to be the system's second mahjong title. That seems excessive, even in light of the platform's embracing of older gamers and Japan's affection for video mahjong. But in truth, Shanghai has basically nothing to do with true mahjong outside of its use of the traditional game's 144 tiles. Even then, a number of Shanghai variants and clones use completely alternate tile sets that completely abandon the mahjong theme altogether; even this version of Shanghai includes a variant set that switches the tiles to the Roman alphabet.

The Roman version here is terrible, though. The bold, all-caps letters become difficult to read when piled up, and the entire game revolves around spotting matches in a big stack of jumbled tiles, so legibility is paramount. Besides, the mahjong tiles themselves actually look quite nice. Unlike with Yakuman, HAL's tile designs use the system's intermediate shades of grey to better mimic the mixed colors of true mahjong pieces. It's still monochromatic, and therefore less intuitive to the eye than Shanghai variants for color consoles, but the minor change makes a huge difference for functionally identical objects.

No, despite being based around mahjong tiles, Shanghai pays only the most superficial lip service to the ancient Chinese game. The oldest version of the game dates back merely to 1981, when it was designed for early PCs by Brodie Lockard. Activision gave the game a commercial release for Macintosh (where it made deft use of that computer's new mouse interface) five years later, and it was ported across to other systems almost immediately. By the time Shanghai hit Game Boy, it had already appeared on Master System, PC Engine, and more.

Conceptually, Shanghai is vastly simpler to play than mahjong. Whereas true mahjong requires you to worry about suits and matches and modifiers and many other factors, Shanghai simply piles up a bunch of tiles in a set (and randomized) configuration and has you match tiles two by two. Since there are four of each tile in a mahjong set, each piece has three possible matches (meaning two pairs per face value). The challenge of the game comes in the fact that only visible pieces at the edge of the pile, or the edge of a stacked tier, are eligible for play. You need to take special care not to lock pieces behind impossible matches — for example, to pair up tiles only when you're sure that you won't do anything stupid, like leave a piece stranded with its only match hidden beneath itself.

Supposedly, Lockard based Shanghai on a classic Chinese puzzle game called The Turtle, though this evidently is considered somewhat apocryphal. In any case, Shanghai‘s function seems straightforward enough: It takes superficial mahjong elements, throws everything complex about the game out the window, and lets Americans feel like they understand “mahjong.” It’s all a lie, but hey.

As an early Game Boy title, Shanghai did the trick. It’s no masterpiece, but HAL managed to put together a respectable rendition of the game. The tile graphics look surprisingly good, the music is a complete ear worm, and it’s eminently playable. Complex? No, not in the least. And certainly it’s not the best rendition of Shanghai these days — not even the best portable rendition. But reasonably addictive and suitably entertaining. It definitely fits the profile of Game Boy’s first few years of software releases: A slow, simple puzzle game with universal casual appeal, yet ultimately nothing special, either.

Game Boy puzzlers, portable Shanghai clones, and HAL’s handheld titles would all get much better over the years. As with many early releases for the system, Shanghai feels like a halting baby step in many ways.

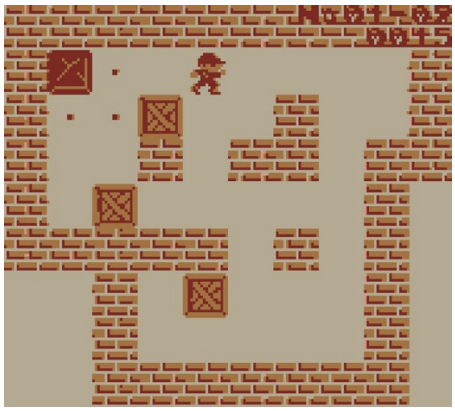
Boxxle

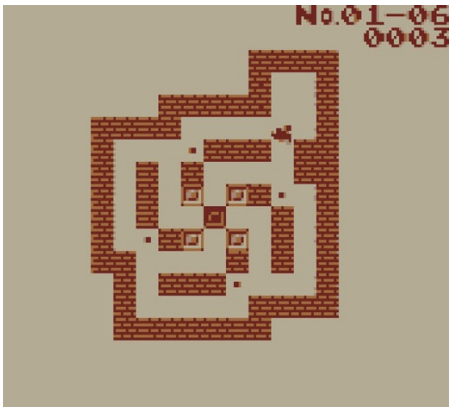
Japanese title: *Soukoban* • 倉庫番

Developer: Atelier Double/Thinking Rabbit

Publisher: Pony Canyon [JP] | FCI [US/Europe]

Release date: 9.1.1989 [JP] | 2.1990 [US] | 1990 [Europe]





The classic puzzle game Soukoban has gone by many names here in America as it's seen release by countless publishers hoping to put a unique face on the same idea (and often the exact same content): Shove It!, Boxy Boy, Sokoban… and those are just the official

releases. You don’t even want to know about the clones. For Game Boy fans, however, the only name that matters is Boxxle.

Despite the name, Boxxle was the legitimate descendant of the original Soukoban, a release blessed and possibly codeveloped by the concept’s original creator at Thinking Rabbit. You may know the name Thinking Rabbit from the strangely titled cooperative NES Castlevania clone 8 Eye’s, but Soukoban was the company’s crown jewel, and it was one of those games that found its way to essentially every platform on earth. Game Boy was no exception — in fact, one might argue it was the game’s ideal home.

As with other early Game Boy releases such as Shanghai, Heiankyo Alien, and Tetris, Boxxle showed up at stores quite innocuously, targeted to an audience that had no clue to its heritage. Eight-year-old kids didn’t care about the fact that Boxxle was actually as old as they were. They just wanted to do something fun with their cool handheld system. Boxxle delivered… but only barely.

By 1989, Boxxle’s underlying age was definitely starting to betray itself through signs of strain. Despite the upbeat music (the maddening, upbeat music) and the cartoon graphics, the foundations for Boxxle (and many of its puzzles) had been set way back in 1981. Despite being an absolute revolution of game design at the time, the bar was admittedly pretty low for video game innovation in 1981. Given the constraints of its original hardware, Soukoban by its very nature consists of extremely limited and simple mechanics, rules, and controls.

Soukoban operates under a deceptively minimal framework. Players control a small man pushing boxes… and that’s it. You can move in any of the cardinal directions in the game’s top-down warehouse view, and you can push crates. You can’t jump, you can’t pull, you can’t perform combos, you can’t break boxes. All you can do is move and push.

In the hands of a skilled level designer, though, these rudimentary mechanics translate into absolutely devastating puzzles. Your limited interactions with the game world greatly reduce your options, and as you endeavor to achieve your goal — relocating every box on screen to a target space — you increasingly find yourself forced to think ahead several steps. Obvious moves rarely are the correct ones, and completing your task often involves making seemingly nonsensical or counterproductive moves as you push boxes well out of the way or make other allowances to slide crates around.

Because you lack the ability to pull boxes, you have to take great care not to push crates into unwinnable situations. Once a crate moves adjacent to a wall, the only way to separate it again is to push it to a gap in the wall and approach it from the other side. A cornered box requires a reset. Simple rules leading to complex situations: That’s the essence of Soukoban.

That being said, Boxxle isn’t exactly the most thrilling take on the concept. It feels extremely sluggish, the incessant music loop becomes a nuisance in a matter of seconds, and despite the pokiness of the controls they manage to feel imprecise and sloppy. You’ll frequently find yourself pushing a crate without meaning to, undermining your progress and forcing you to start over again.

On the other hand, it does fit the platform quite nicely. There’s no scrolling — which means the larger puzzles use a zoomed-out view in order to fit on Game Boy’s 160×144

screen, the game having been designed for twice that resolution — and you can resume your progress across sessions by jotting down passwords. Granted, passwords don't make a lot of sense for portable games where you inevitably find yourself fumbling for paper while on the go, but at least the option is there, making this the first Game Boy release to offer any sort of persistence across sessions. Despite the inclusion of passwords, Boxxle still falls into the quick-hit, pick-upand-play format for which the system seems so ideally suited. It's no Tetris, but what is?

Boxxle also includes a somewhat limited level editor — a nice idea, but in a world predating widespread access to the Internet, somewhat futile. Who was there to share with outside of your limited set of friends and family, who probably didn't care? Still, points for trying. Boxxle wasn't the first time Soukoban had made its way to a portable system. The Game Boy's failed precursor, Epoch's Game Pocket Computer, saw an official version of Soukoban as one of its meager handful of releases in the span of its brief life.

It worked quite well on that more limited device, so unsurprisingly it translated well to the relatively powerful Game Boy. On the other hand, Boxxle felt somewhat behind the times compared to what was happening elsewhere in the Soukoban canon: Shortly before the Game Boy version debuted, Thinking Rabbit debuted Soukoban Perfect on the NEC PC-9801. It had more than 300 levels compared to Boxxle's paltry 108, most of which were deeply hostile and demoralizing (aka "expert level") challenges made by monstrous humans twisted by years of Soukoban addiction.

Besides cartridge space limitations, the discrepancy between the contemporaneous Soukoban Perfect and Boxxle probably comes down to the fact that Thinking Rabbit (and thus Soukoban creator Hiroyuki Imabayashi) worked on the PC game, while Boxxle was developed by Atelier Double. The design credit in Boxxle is given not to Imabayashi but rather to Toshiro Inoue, who founded Atelier Double in the mid-'80s as one of those ghost development contractors who assisted publishers churn out material quickly to capitalize on the Famicom boom.

While Soukoban was regarded as a classic in its day, by 1989 it had become fairly long in the tooth. That wouldn't stop a number of Soukoban clones from hitting Game Boy, but they feel almost like filler content. Boxxle's legacy made its appearance on Game Boy inevitable, even necessary, but it didn't win any awards and probably won't go down in history as many people's favorite. It was a solid, workmanlike release for Game Boy — involving enough to amuse anyone who owned it, but not the sort of thing anyone but collectors would hunt down today.

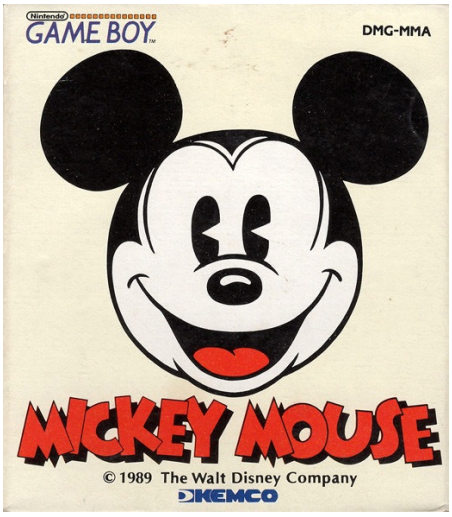
The Bugs Bunny Crazy Castle

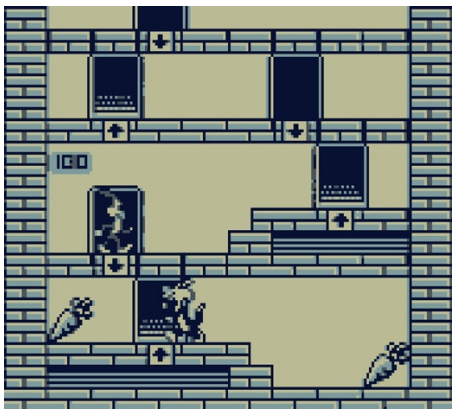
Japanese title: *Mickey Mouse* • ミッキーマウス

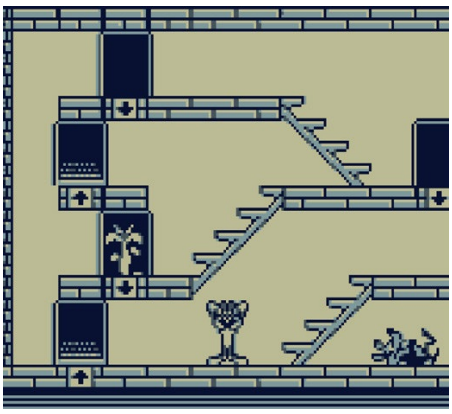
Developer: Kotobuki System

Publisher: Kemco-Seika

Release date: 9.5.1989 [JP] | 3.1990 [US] | 1990 [EU]







Released in September 1989 in Japan, The Bugs Bunny Crazy Castle stands as the Game Boy's first licensed release (that is, the first to bear a license from another medium). However, the particulars of its license — or rather, licenses — and chronology of its release variants make a compelling case for all those prejudices people have against

licensed games. Crazy Castle isn't too shabby a game, but trying to keep track of all its manifold permutations is a job for an Excel file.

At its heart, Bugs Bunny feels like a throwback from a simpler era. Say… 1983 or so? It has the feel of a classic single-screen action title like Lode Runner, Door Door, or Burger Time — though it scrolls left and right, so maybe a more accurate comparison would be Mappy. In any case, you get the idea: The player controls a protagonist (in this case, Warner Studio's famous cartoon rabbit) dashing to and fro within a simple maze of platforms, pursued by numerous foes who hold the upper hand through strength of numbers and the asymmetrical ability to kill on contact.

Bugs, as is the way of such post–Pac-Man maze chase heroes, can on occasion turn the tables. He can snag boxing gloves that allow him to punch his foes into submission; consume potions that turn him briefly invincible; and shove crates and safes into his foes (or drop them onto said foes' heads, crushing them flat). Unusually for this style of game, once you squash a bad guy, they stay squashed for the remainder of the stage and don't respawn — with careful play, many levels actually allow you to clear out all the bad guys and wrap up your objectives unmolested.

Those objectives consist entirely of collecting. Bugs gathers up carrots scattered about the maze, bringing the level to an end and earning a 1UP the instant he snags the last carrot in the current level. A simple password system (simple enough that you could just memorize each one as it pops up) allows players to record their progress for later play. There's also, oddly enough, a playback feature that allows you watch a replay of the most recent stage. Since this isn't exactly the most intricate game in the world, it doesn't really lend itself to triumphant self-congratulation.

There is an element of randomness to Crazy Castle in the movement of your enemies; most of them seem to jerk awkwardly about the screen, somewhat haphazardly. The exception here is Daffy Duck, who fixates on Bugs and will shadow his every movement. Thankfully, Daffy never seems to travel to different levels via pipes and stairs, whereas his less determined counterparts like Sylvester and Yosemite Sam have an unsettling tendency to come directly at you. On the other hand, they also tend to walk right off ledges.

It's hardly timeless, but The Bugs Bunny Crazy Castle manages to be a perfectly entertaining puzzle platformer. Taken in the context of its time, it seems fairly impressive for being a near-simultaneous release with an almost identical NES game. Unlike Super Mario Land, Crazy Castle didn't really compromise its design to fit the portable platform; aside from the color palette and the proportion of screen sprites, Crazy Castle on Game Boy is essentially the same game as on NES. They use many of the same stage layouts and even some of the same passwords.

What the different versions of Crazy Castle didn't use in common, however, were characters. Across two platforms and two territories, Crazy Castle appeared in no less than three permutations of different licenses. The American releases for Game Boy and NES mark the only two versions of the game to bear the same name and characters.

In Japan, however, The Bugs Bunny Crazy Castle never existed. Instead, the game began life with a February 1989 release for Famicom Disk System called Roger Rabbit. Based, obviously, on the previous year's brilliant live/animated motion picture *Who*

Framed Roger Rabbit?, Kemco's Roger Rabbit was a completely different creature from the Who Framed Roger Rabbit? that appeared in the U.S. courtesy of LJN. Where LJN's approach to the license took the form of a vaguely SCUMM-like adventure game with some awful action sequences grafted on, Kemco's Japanese version was… an action puzzle platformer in which Judge Doom's weasels chased Roger Rabbit around a maze of stairs and pipes. In short, it was the exact same game that would be issued seven months later in the U.S. as Crazy Castle for NES, then converted directly to Game Boy.

Kemco's grasp on the Roger Rabbit license appears to have been short-lived; both the Japanese Game Boy port and the American NES game showed up about half a year after Roger Rabbit's launch, and neither featured that character. The American game kept it in the family (specifically, family Leporidae) by turning Roger into Bugs. The Japanese Game Boy version, however, went the other direction and turned Roger into Mickey Mouse. This is weirdly appropriate, actually. One of the rules guiding the Bugs and Mickey cameos in Who Framed Roger Rabbit? was that both had to share equal screen time. Kemco was just keeping it in-bounds.

The truth of the matter is that all four games, for all intents and purposes, are exactly the same save for the character sprites. Mickey Mouse avoids Pete the Cat, Roger Rabbit evades Doom's weasel cops, and Bugs dodges Sylvester and Daffy. Roger gathers hearts, Bug collects carrots. But they're all the same. Same power-ups, same skills, same mechanics, same level designs. Even the music was the same, save for the familiar theme on Mickey Mouse's title screen.

It makes for a strange tangle of licenses, but the all-purpose design of the underlying Crazy Castle game meant Kemco could get away with simply tweaking the sprites and issue the game uncompromised in different regions. Sure, maybe it made more sense for Roger Rabbit to tackle foes with spring-mounted boxing gloves than for Mickey Mouse to do so, but the language of cartoon pratfalls turns out to be surprisingly universal. This would prove to be the case for Crazy Castle's many sequels as well — though eventually the series became established enough for Kemco to use it as a springboard for their own original character, Kid Klown.

While not exactly a legendary classic, Crazy Castle wasn't a bad game by any means. And for Game Boy-owning kids in 1989 and 1990, it must have been pretty sweet to own a portable carbon copy of a fairly respectable NES game soon after the color version's launch. For their Game Boy debut, Kemco did pretty alright.

Hyper Lode Runner: The Labyrinth of Doom

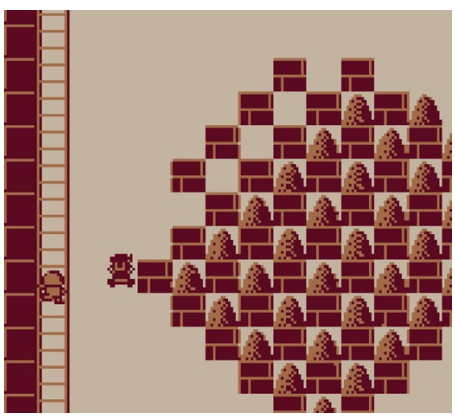
Japanese title: *Hyper Lode Runner* • ハイパーロードランナー

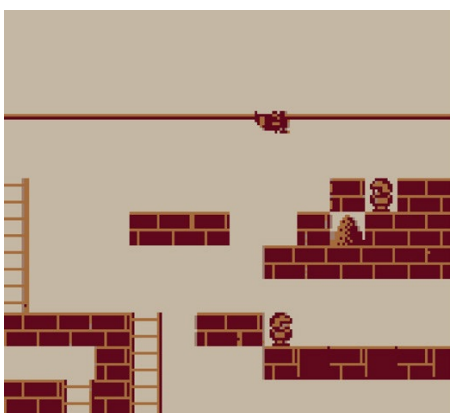
Developer: TOSE

Publisher: Bandai

Release date: 9.21.1989 [JP] | 2.1990 [US] | 1990 [EU]

Super Game Boy: No enhancements





How circular gaming has become. Over the past couple of decades, portable and PC gaming have essentially existed on opposite ends of the medium's total spectrum; handheld systems lend themselves to low-power, efficient game design, whereas PC developers typically revel in the format's raw power, sometimes designing games that demand so much processing muscle that the machines capable of running them optimally won't exist for several years. With the advent of widespread independent game development, though, PCs now play home to some of the most modest creations the medium has to offer — and, thanks in particular to some canny folks at Sony, the best of those games have made their way to PlayStation Vita. Handhelds and PCs have been reconciled at long last.

In its early days, though, Game Boy played host to quite a few PC games as well. Admittedly, they weren't really contemporary by the time 1989 rolled around, but the modest power and shoddy (read: non-existent) color output of Nintendo's first portable console made it a perfect home for PC games of the early '80s. Not only did the likes of Boxxle/ Soukoban, Shanghai, and Heiankyo Alien originally show up on a number of monochromatic computers themselves, some of the machines they ran on used the same fundamental Z80-based architecture as Game Boy. I wouldn't go so far as to say the Game Boy was a natural successor to 8-bit microcomputers of the '80s, what with its lack of a keyboard and all, but some of the once-cutting-edge classics that defined the likes of the VIC-20 and Apple II made a surprisingly good fit for the portable. In that light, you'd think that Lode Runner would have been a perfect match for the platform. Debuting in 1983 on Apple II, Doug Smith's seminal trap-em-up platformer was in many ways the prototype for The Bugs Bunny Crazy Castle and its kin. As in Pac-Man or Lode Runner's contemporary Mappy, the player avatar himself had no means of direct offense; only through indirect action could you hold your swiftly moving enemies at bay — and even then only momentarily.

Lode Runner, as the name implies, sees players dashing through complex mazes in search of gold under the protection of deadly antagonists (it's hard to call them "bad guys" since you are, after all, the one looting their mazes). Generally the enemy runners appear as robots, though in the original PC version's source material they were referred to as monks — presumably the Eastern variety of martial arts monk rather than the Christian version with tonsures and chants — and for god knows what reason they're depicted as skeletons with evil glowing eyes on the Hyper Lode Runner box art. They can destroy you on contact, whereas you can only slow them down by drilling holes in the ground (that whole "mining" theme made into a play mechanics). A pit-fallen monk will extricate itself after a few seconds, so unless you time things so that the self-healing pits seal up while an enemy is inside, trapping enemies really only buys you a short respite. Even if you "kill" a monk/robot/Skeletor, a replacement will respawn immediately — often in a place that doesn't exactly work in your favor.

With the odds stacked against you and such complex mazes to deal with, Lode Runner plays out as a fast-paced, frenetic adventure. But it's one visually optimized for Game Boy's miserable visual specs; the original Apple II version of the game used stick figures for characters, racing along a stark black field and plain blue bricks. By comparison, Game Boy's four shades of greenish-grey seem downright luxurious.

Not only that, but Lode Runner had an extra boon working in its favor for the new portable system: Japanese developers had adopted the series as a personal favorite, and thanks to its success on Famicom it had basically become synonymous with Nintendo systems. Hudson kind of lucked into great timing with their Famicom port of Lode Runner: It was the first-ever third-party release for the system, and it arrived just as Japan decided to go crazy for Famicom. With barely a dozen games to choose from, these new console owners snapped up anything they could find, and that included Lode Runner. The original PC versions definitely qualified as a major blockbuster success, but that amounted to a few hundred thousand units moved across multiple formats. Lode Runner on Famicom reportedly sold 1.5 million copies, and then the U.S. release allegedly sold another million.

Clearly Lode Runner worked quite nicely as a console title, and Bandai (who had picked up the Lode Runner licensed from Irem after Irem snagged it from Hudson) must have seen in Nintendo's new Game Boy an opportunity for history to repeat itself. While Hyper Lode Runner wasn't quite the system's first third-party release, it definitely had front-row seats to the event, launching a mere five months after the system's debut.

Alas, history was not to repeat itself. While I can't find exact numbers for Hyper Lode Runner, we can safely assume it didn't become a second blockbuster; the series wouldn't return to Game Boy for more than a decade, and Bandai would quickly hunker down behind a steady stream of easy licensed anime releases for Game Boy. Had Lode Runner simply passed its prime? Maybe — after all, the Famicom version arrived a mere year after the original Apple II release, whereas this arrived five years later — but let's not fail to take into consideration the fact that Hyper Lode Runner simply wasn't very good.

Bandai — or rather, developer-forhire TOSE — based Hyper Lode Runner on the Famicom style for the series. It featured cartoonish graphics, and it ran at a slower pace than the PC originals due to the system's limited resolution. Since the Game Boy couldn't fit as much information on screen as PCs could, just as the Famicom's chunky graphics reduced the live viewing area, these ports took a slower pace in order to give players a fighting chance. It wouldn't be fair to maintain a PC-like speed while offering only a tiny window into the overall levels.

Unfortunately, TOSE wasn't nearly as smart about their work as Hudson had been (or Tamtex, who produced Irem's Lode Runner sequels for Famicom Disk System). While Lode Runner on NES offered a cramped view into the action, the level designs were more limited in their scrolling capabilities. Hyper Lode Runner can scroll in all directions, meaning enemies can potentially hit you from all directions before you spot them. Hudson's Lode Runner gave you a quick preview of each stage before the action began, allowing you to scope out the maze and the placement of enemies; Hyper Lode Runner offers no such niceties.

And most of all, Lode Runner kicked things off with a series of fairly reasonable challenges, gradually escalating the complexity of its maze designs to ease you into the more advanced challenges ahead. Not so with Hyper Lode Runner, which starts out with highly complex mazes at the very begining and escalates to "expert level" in no time. And, sure, that's fine on some levels; Bandai was probably targeting this entry at seasoned fans. After all, there was an audience of more than two million Lode Runner fanatics in the

world, so it was safe to assume a good number of gamers who picked up Hyper Lode Runner already knew the ins and outs of the action. But going straight for expert mode left newcomers out in the cold — and considering the Game Boy's target audience of young players, it's safe to assume many customers would be new to the franchise.

Hyper Lode Runner's level designs would make for difficult play under the best circumstance, but the cramped graphics and slow pace really bog it down. The former makes the already tricky stages unreasonably hard, while the latter creates considerable tedium. Constructs that require repetitive action would have worked under the computer versions' snappy pace but drag on and on here. Hyper Lode Runner's failings may appear subtle, but they prove to be significant.

Nothing more effectively sums up the game's thoughtless design like the optional Edit mode, which allows players to create up to eight interlinked stages. It's a flexible and easy-to-use level editor, an important part of the Lode Runner experience (the Apple II original was one of the first games ever to include a level editor), but it's utterly pointless here: There's no way to save your creations. The PC versions obviously had diskette support, and the fan community proved to be so creative than entire expansion packs were released consisting entirely of player-built stages. Irem's Famicom Disk System releases likewise offered save support. Even Hudson's Famicom cartridge version, published long before Nintendo introduced battery saves, at least offered a save option in its Japanese release: The game supported Nintendo's cassette-based Famicom Data Recorder. But Hyper Lode Runner supports none of these things; and while the game incorporates a password system, its role begins and ends with allowing you to jump to the game's later stages. You can't save level designs or even swap them via Link Cable, so once the system powers off those complex creations are lost forever.

In short, what we have here is a fine example of what not to do with a classic game port. Hyper Lode Runner should have been an easy success, but its numerous minor flaws and poorly considered design choices bog it down. Even the one new feature TOSE added — locked doors that lead to a "sub stage" for many levels — can't redeem this mess; it just prolongs the agony. Hyper Lode Runner reeks of laziness or lack of care: This is just a portable game, so why make the effort? This would become a running theme throughout the Game Boy's life, and it's something you see in plenty of handheld and mobile games today. Like I said, gaming can be quite circular indeed.

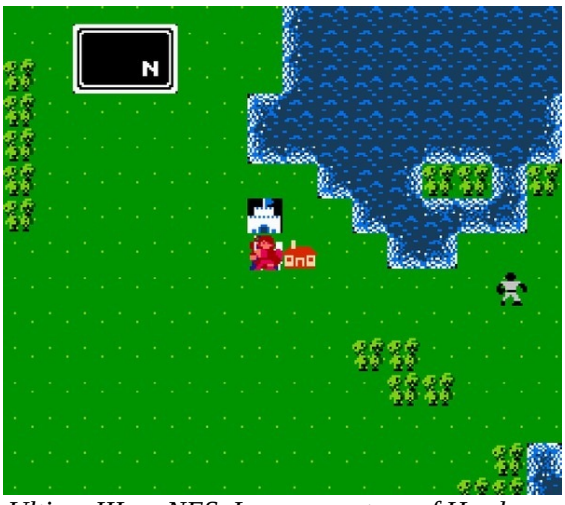
The PC connection

That a significant fraction of Game Boy's initial releases — a full fifth of 1989's games — originally hailed from personal computers might seem something of a surprise, even if you take into account the fact that the chip powering the system (Zilog's venerable Z80) had been a mainstay of PCs for a decade at that point. But in truth, Game Boy's PC-heavy lineup simply carried forward a popular trend on Japanese consoles like the Famicom and MSX: They were the easiest and most accessible places for Japanese gamers to get their hands on popular American PC games.

The Japanese PC scene of the '80s offered all manner of vibrant, original content. NEC's computer lineup (e.g. the 8801 and 9801) and Sharp's X68000 gained considerable traction in Japan, but they tended not to offer nearly as many conversions of Western games as you might expect. Instead, they played host to a tremendous array of uniquely Japanese works: Detailed graphical adventures, high-speed shoot-em-ups, visually stunning platformers, and various and sundry adult-themed titles. Generally speaking, the deviation between Japanese computer and console content hadn't polarized nearly as much as the two markets had diverged in the U.S., where PCs had largely become dominated by sprawling RPGs and mind-bogglingly dense strategy games.

Ultima III on Apple II. Image courtesy of Hardcore Gaming 101.

Perhaps because Western computers tended to lag behind the graphical capacity of Japanese PCs (which featured high-resolution displays as a matter of necessity; the convoluted kanji alphabet, based on thousands of Chinese idiograms, simply couldn't display properly at standard VGA resolution), games originating on Western PCs evidently were deemed a better fit for Japanese consoles. Certain megahits like Prince of Persia and SimCity naturally made their way to X68000 and PC98 in the process of showing up on every system ever made, of course, but by and large Japanese gamers were more likely to find popular American and British PC titles on Famicom, Famicom Disk System, and MSX.



Ultima III on NES. Image courtesy of Hardcore Gaming 101.

In fact, entire studios made a business of converting Western PC titles to Famicom. Several of those companies popped up immediately on Game Boy: Atelier Double, Pony Canyon, and of course TOSE (whose remit brought them into contact with practically every kind of video game). To a lesser degree, there was also Kemco, who had specialized in a very specific set of Western releases. A handful of these conversions even made their way back to the American NES — Kemco's MacVenture ports were easily the most popular, but Pony Canyon was the most prolific by far. Its conversions of PC RPGs like Ultima: Exodus and practically the entire Advanced Dungeons & Dragons franchise showed up on NES

in English, though many of these remained shrouded in obscurity despite going international in both directions.

This was for good reason: Compared to their source material, Pony Canyon's conversions were generally dreadful. Ultima: Exodus, though fairly janky on NES, nevertheless stands as one of Pony Canyon's better PC adaptations; though compromised, it at least demonstrated an effort to adapt the game to the style of the NES, with lots of cute little revamps of the party sprites. Compared to something like the dire Hillsfar, it's a downright masterpiece. And for anyone wondering how a game as complex as Pool of Radiance could possibly work on NES… the sad reality was that it couldn't.

It was this legacy that continued on Game Boy — though to the credit of those pioneering developers, at least they made suitable selections to adapt to the system. Lots of puzzle games and low-fi action titles would appear on Game Boy, and what few high-end PC franchises did make their way over were generally reworked to fit the system. Again, Ultima stands apart here: Runes of Virtue was a completely original game rather than a water-down port, and still holds up.

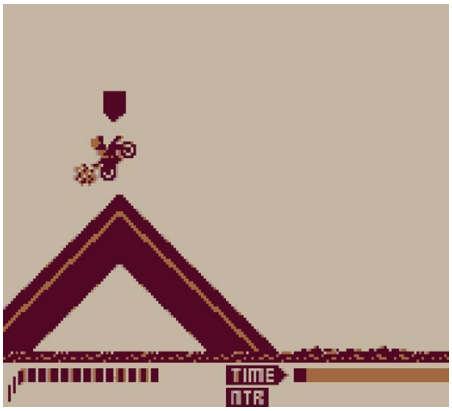
Motocross Maniacs

Japanese title: *Motocross Maniacs* • モトクロスマニアクス

Developer: Konami

Publisher: Konami/Ultra

Release date: 9.21.1989 [JP] | 1.1990 [US] | 1990 [EU]



To be realistic about it, there were only so many ways you could make a racing game in the days before true 3D graphics came around: Top-down, isometric, or fake-scaling pseudo-3D. And when it came to motocrossstyle motorcycle racing, your options became even more limited; because bike racing leans so heavily on uneven tracks dotted with

ramps and ditches, the pseudo-3D and top-down styles weren't really suited for the task.

So perhaps it's inevitable that Konami's Game Boy debut, bike rally racer Motocross Maniacs, feels like a mutant strain of Nintendo's Excitebike; how else were you going to have made a bike game back then? Sure, Mach Rider had the over-the-shoulder camera style of an Out Run, but it sprawled across a smooth, even course — a far cry from the sort of ground that allows for crazy leaps and wheelies that Konami was going for here.

The similarities end quickly, though. After putting you through a couple of Excitebike-esque leaps, the track design soon takes on its own distinct style, turning into something more focused on learning the lay of the track and perfecting your racing skills.

Motocross Maniacs doesn't focus on racing in the traditional sense — your goal isn't to best other racers but simply to beat a time limit. This probably has as much to do with the Game Boy's limitations as anything else; the Link Cable enabled multiplayer, sure, but it was a slow and unreliable connection, and while developers would eventually figure out how to make it work for racing, this early in the system's life — a mere five months after its debut — those advanced programming techniques perhaps had yet to be sorted out.

Motocross Maniacs is as much a platformer as a racer. Taking the straight and obvious path along the ground sends you crawling through the mud at glacial speeds, a guaranteed way to fail to make your target time even on the easiest tracks and settings.

Instead, the proper approach to the game involves making liberal use of the raised portions of the tracks, suspended high above the ground — and the only way to do that is to make smart use of your nitro boosts. You start each race with a handful of boosts that send you flying forward at high speed for a brief second or so; this won't take you far on the ground, but use a nitro injection as you hit the lip of a ramp and you'll go flying — ideally, over some of the muddier patches of ground.

Nitrous refills and other power-ups dangle in the air to encourage you to take a leap at the right times. Ramps also frequently lead to more complex aerial structures, complex arrangements of loops and half-pipes that demand proper use of boosting but in turn reward you with even more power-ups.

Motocross Maniacs rewards practice; you definitely will not finish most tracks on your first run-through. The later tracks in particular demand you learn their ins and outs in order to succeed, and often if you don't hit the ramps and make extremely conservative use of nitrous you won't get anywhere at all. If Motocross Maniacs has a flaw, it's that many tracks will actually lead you to a dead end if you run out of nitro, and there's no easy way to forfeit besides resetting.

One of the game's more fascinating features comes in its undocumented powerups. In addition to boosts and time bonuses, you can also gain the jet power that allows you to literally fly by burning multiple successive nitros. And if you perform flips at certain points in a track — generally wherever you see a sign in the background that reads "GO!" or something similar — you'll be granted a strange reward in the form of mini-bikers that follow you like Gradius Options. Normally if you take a tumble on a ramp, you'll lose your Jet power-up. If you have a mini-biker in tow, they'll soak up the damage and allow you to keep your booster even if you screw up — something not even hinted at in the manual.

Motocross Maniacs saw a handful of sequels up through the Game Boy Advance era, and a similarly slim collection of racers borrowed from its design (notably DMA's Uniracers and RedLynx's Trials Fusion). But side-scrolling, trick-centric, platformer-racers haven't left one of gaming's richer legacies. Well, unless you count Sonic the Hedgehog — that series' mechanics and style bear more than just a slight similarity to Motocross Maniacs, though in a far more expansive context.

Still, you can trace its unusual style back to Excitebike; Motocross Maniacs followed closely on the heels of a Japan-only racer by Konami called Motocross Champion, which was basically Excitebike on circular course rather than as a belt-scroller. The Game Boy's limitations caused Konami's designers to simplify it to a side-scrolling format. As often can be the case, though, the game designed under sharper constraints proved to be more interesting and memorable. Motocross Maniacs may not be a timeless Game Boy classic, but it's worth exploring as one of the more distinctive releases for the system.

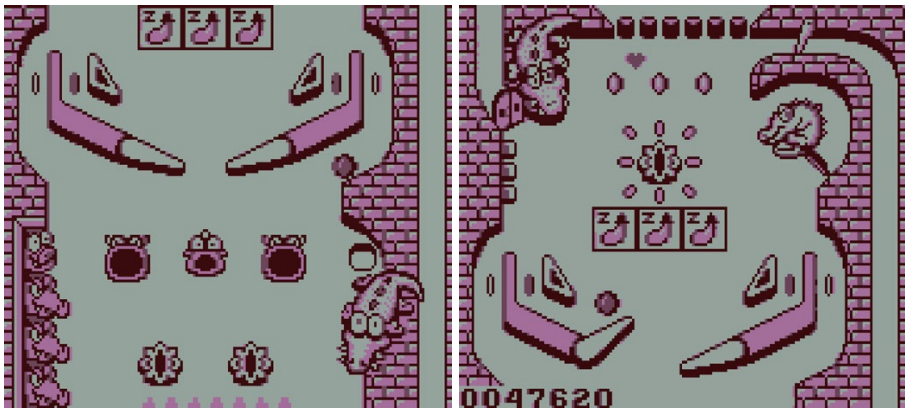
Revenge of the Gator

Japanese title: *Pinball: 66 Hiki no Wana Daikoushin* • ピンボール 66匹のワニ大行進

Developer: HAL

Publisher: HAL

Release date: 10.18.1989 [JP] | 2.1990 [US] | 3.1990 [EU]



In the early days of the Game Boy, one of the biggest challenges facing developers was

the question of how ambitious to make their games. Portable gaming, new and untested a format as it was, posed a dilemma, especially on the decided limited Game Boy hardware. Should these works aspire to the scope and substance of console titles? Was it better to aim small? And at what point did elaborate design break down on a screen with four shades of blurry grey? How much content did a game that cost 60-75% as much as an NES game need to offer?

While the platform would ultimately play host to any number of console-scale creations, many of the finest releases for Game Boy demonstrated a different philosophy altogether: They focused on doing just a few things well.

HAL's Revenge of the Gator could practically be the poster child for the advantages of keeping things focused. It's a single-table pinball game — nothing more, nothing less. Old-time Nintendo fans may well be reminded of NES Pinball as they play Revenge of the Gator, and for good reason: HAL helped Nintendo produce Pinball. That fateful connection didn't simply seal a lasting relationship between the two companies, though; it also created the template for Revenge of the Gator. Admittedly, a mostly forgotten Game Boy title probably isn't as significant in the long run as the alliance that would give Nintendo its future CEO, but the little things count, too.

With its inexplicable alligator motif and extremely limited gameplay, Revenge of the Gator would seem a far cry from a portable classic. And yet! The tremendous amount of love and care that HAL invested into Gator really sets it apart from its portable contemporaries. Everything about the game sings quality.

Yes, it's just a pinball game. But it looks great. The physics, though not perfect, are excellent. The interactive elements of the board demonstrate remarkable care and attention. It features excellent music and sound effects. There's even a silly little dancing alligator ditty on the title screen. I can't find any information on why this game turned out the way it did — why alligators!? Nothing in HAL's catalog echoes this game's motif, and it doesn't appear to be based on any sort of licensed property. It's simply a pinball game designed in the style of classic tables, which would inevitably have some random theme. Like the old mechanical amusements of the classic arcade, Revenge of the Gator doesn't need a reason to be what it is. Also unclear is what, precisely, warrants these gators avenging themselves on player.

In terms of design, Revenge of the Gator is a four-screen board — though it's presented in five. The main board spans two screens, with an intermediate "linking" view providing a midpoint between the top and bottom screens to help keep the ball centered on-screen and prevent the transitions between the two from being too abrupt. Above the main board are two bonus screens, which loosely resemble Breakout. Or Alleyway, to put a somewhat more contemporary spin on it.

And at every turn, there are alligators. When you die, the ball drops into the gutter to

be consumed by a massive gator with huge eyelashes; when you activate the safety bumpers, they take the form of gators. Gators occupy the center of the playing field, their mouths constantly flexing to create vortices the swirl the ball away to other parts. Gators dwell at the left edge of the screen, waiting for the ball to flatten their schnozzes. When you reach the Breakout bonus screen, you're trying to destroy the ground beneath a wandering gator to send it plummeting into the gutter. It's weird, but at least it's thorough.

Revenge of the Gator moves quickly; the ball tears around the screen, and a fraction of a second can make the difference between success and the ball being gobbled up by that huge gator at the bottom. Everything animates smoothly, though, and despite having direct influence only over a couple sets of flippers, the action always feels within your control. Revenge of the Gator could have included more designs, a more elaborate board, or any number of other features. But instead, HAL stuck to a limited selection of elements and polished each to excellence.

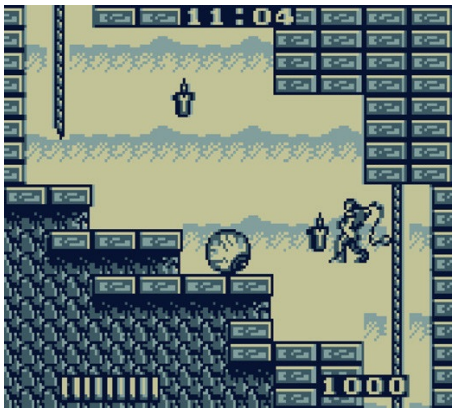
Castlevania: The Adventure

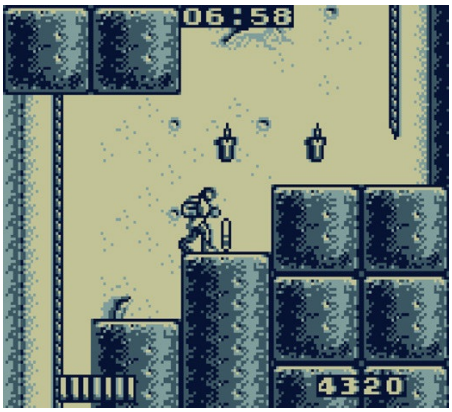
Japanese title: *Dracula Densetsu* • ドラキュラ伝 説

Developer: Konami

Publisher: Konami

Release date: 1o.27.1989 [JP] | 12.1989 [US] | 1990 [EU]



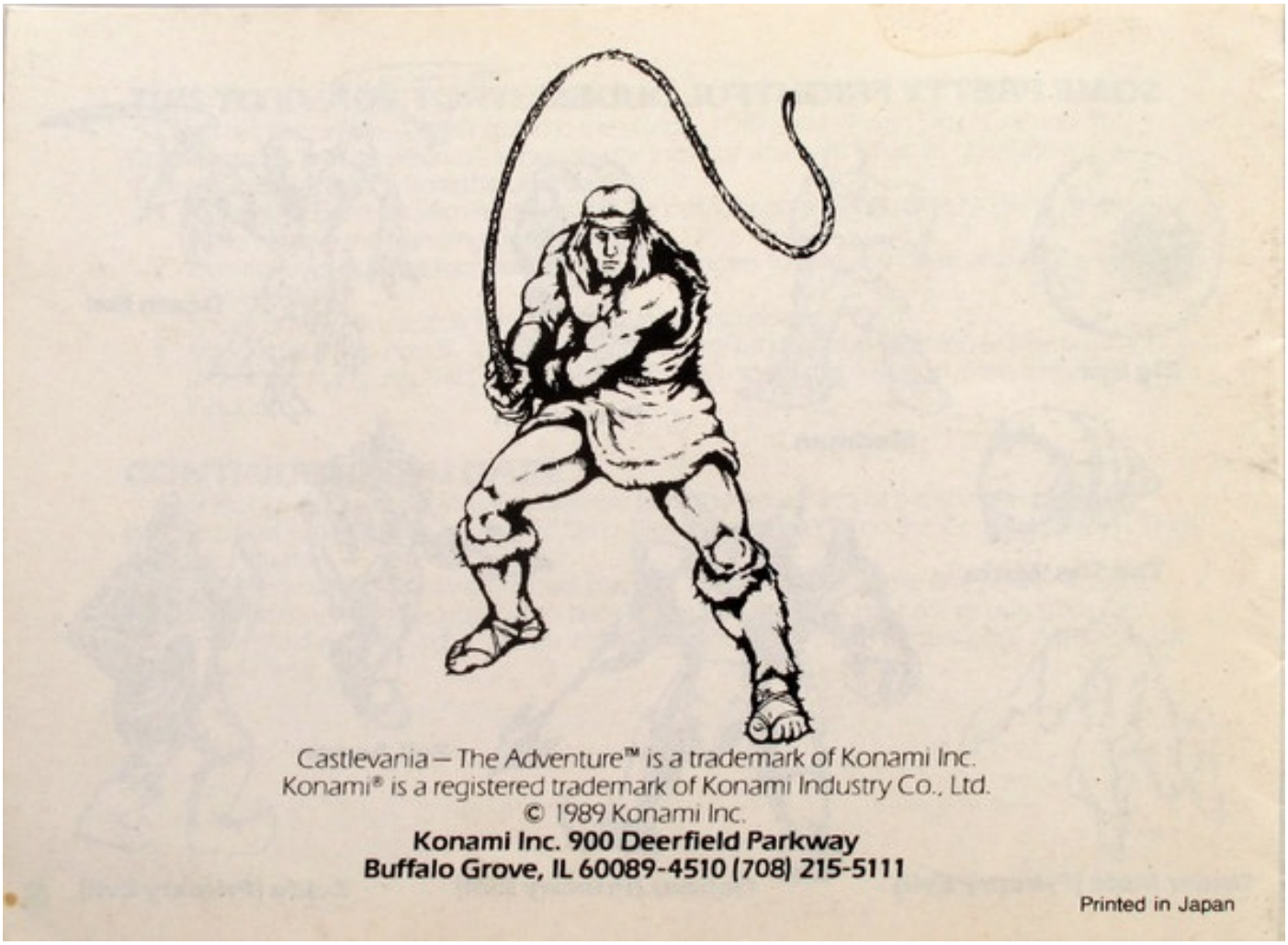


Back in the ’80s and early ’90s, no series could sell me on a platform like Castlevania. I loved the NES trilogy, and when early screens of sequels for Game Boy and Super NES began to materialize, those systems shot right to the top of my must-have list. Once I

finally got my hands on a Super NES, I immediately sought out Super Castlevania IV, and it was everything I had hoped for.

Unfortunately, I can’t say the same thing for the series’ Game Boy incarnation, Castlevania: The Adventure. By all appearances, The Adventure should have been nothing short of portable perfection. It captured the detailed, iconic look of Castlevania brilliantly. Not only with its hunched whip-wielding Belmont protagonist, but with the scenery, too. Konami had a knack for crafting utterly gorgeous miniature worlds on NES within the same colors and limitations everyone else obeyed, and their Game Boy artists somehow achieved the same effect without even using color. Likewise, the company’s insanely talented musicians squeezed the best tunes yet heard from the Game Boy sound chip. Castlevania: The Adventure should have been great… right?

Unfortunately, there’s more to a game than looks and music, and The Adventure fell short in every other area. But foremost among its failings, the game was unbearably sluggish. Every single action in the game ran at what appeared to be halfspeed, and that same lack of celerity trickled down to affect every element of the game. Christopher Belmont felt like he was ignoring the player’s commands much of the time, failing to respond to button presses in the heat of action. He slogged ploddingly through the Transylvania landscape, puttering with all the urgency of a pensioner on the way to a picnic.



Castlevania: The Adventure manual, back page detail

Somehow, though, the world around Christopher didn’t seem to be affected by those

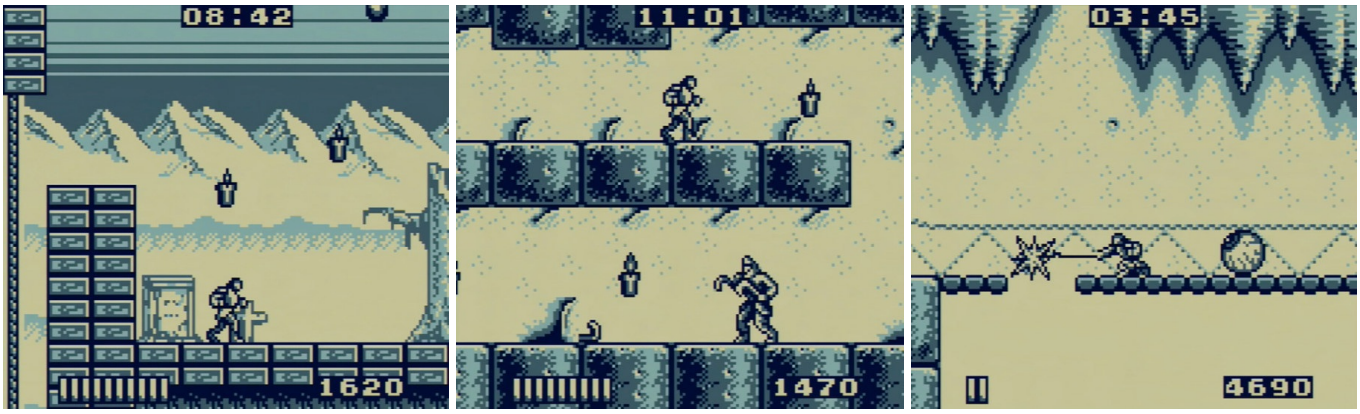
same limitations. Enemies moved about as quickly as they did in the NES games. Moving platforms would drop rapidly from beneath Christopher's feet. The series' already rigid expectations of pixel-perfect play took on a miserable new dimension here as players founds themselves grossly overmatched and forced to rely on a combination of memorization and sheer luck. Castlevania: The Adventure proved guilty of the gravest offense a Castlevania game could commit: It failed to recapture the series' innate sense of rhythm and reflex.

If anyone had been paying attention, they would have recognized a pattern in Castlevania releases. The series had a wild hitor-miss dynamic, with releases alternating between excellence and miserable failure. Yes, the NES trilogy was top-notch (even if Simon's Quest stumbled with some unintuitive design), but all the other games were thudding failures. Haunted Castle was an abomination of hideous visuals and sloppy, arbitrary level layouts; Vampire Killer gang-pressed the original Castlevania's design into a wandering, frequently unfair mess of non-linear corridors and cheap hits.

The reality of the Castlevania series is that great Castlevania games are insanely difficult to make. Konami has missed as often as it's hit, and tiny details can cause an entire entry to go awry. Just look at the difference between Super NES Dracula X and Rondo of Blood: They're largely the same game, but Rondo feels almost indescribably superior to the American release for its fine details and more expansive layouts. The Adventure could have been to Castlevania III as Super Mario Land was to Super Mario Bros. 3: A quirky take on the concept that nevertheless succeeded on its own merits. But the fundamental magic of the series, present in Super Mario Land, failed to materialize for Castlevania: The Adventure.

The game offers weird, off-putting takes on series standards. You don't climb stairs, you shimmy up ropes. There are no skeletons, just armored hulks who throw boomeranging scythes and look like Ninja Gaiden rejects. You don't collect sub-weapons; instead, Christopher's whip powers up a couple of times, ultimately gaining the ability to fire a ball of destructive energy from its tip. But his whip power suffers from the same degradation as the gun in Blaster Master, shedding a level of power each time an enemy connects. Hearts therefore don't function as sub-weapon currency; they work like hearts in every other action game and restore Christopher's health. The only other power-up takes the form of holy crosses, which grant Christopher brief invincibility.

The crosses really throw the game's design failures into sharp relief. They're often used as a free pass in areas where platform layouts or enemy placements are so poorly arranged that you can't possibly squeak past without taking a hit unless you rely on invincibility: The very definition of awful game design. In many cases, enemies and hazards are arranged in such a way that you have to play just so in order to avoid taking damage; there's very little room for improvisation or player agency in Castlevania: The Adventure.



And in any case, there’s little motivation to bother. The game is so clumsy, so deliberately antagonistic, that the only reason you’d want to play the game more than once is you were a kid with a limited allowance and the poor fortune to have bought The Adventure as your sole new game pickup for the season.

Surprisingly, Castlevania: The Adventure featured a top-flight staff. No less than Nobuya Nakazato (of Contra and Rocket Knight fame) and Masato Maegawa (who would establish Treasure a few years later) were leads on The Adventure. This definitely ranks among the lower tier of their creations — though it’s hard to know where the blame lies for this off-kilter spin-off. Time limitations? Platform constraints? Trying to push the Game Boy too hard?

Whatever the case, the involvement of several long-time Konami in-house composers (including future Treasure co-founder Norio Hanzawa) help salvage the game from being a total wash-out. But clearly it wasn’t the work of the standard Castlevania team, who were occupied with designing Castlevania III at the time. Many of The Adventure‘s more awful design choices were smoothed over for Castlevania II: Belmont’s Revenge, only to resurface nearly a decade later in Castlevania Legends, developed at KCE Kobe.

Whatever the case, Castlevania: The Adventure may well be the worst game we’ve seen on Game Boy to date. Sure, there have been some bland or dull titles, but none that so utterly squandered a world-class property like we see here. The discrepancy between potential and outcome here is truly breathtaking and a sign of further missteps to come on the platform.

Special thanks to Ray VGM for contributing developer information for this article.

NES SEQUELS AND SPINOFFS

The Game Boy naturally existed as a sort of companion to the NES, a complementary home for Nintendo and its licensees to take popular game concepts portable. It took a while for this relationship to properly evolve and for developers to lock down exactly how these adaptations and conversions should work, but the seeds were in place from the very beginning: Five of the first six releases for the system were either ports or spinoffs of NES properties.

It's important to remember just what a beast the NES was in the late '80s in terms of global mindshare: Nintendo had 90% of the U.S. console market locked up, and a comparable percentage in Japan as well. Competing systems like the Atari 7800 and Sega Master System may as well not even have existed. And in the U.S., the Sega Genesis and TurboGrafx-16 were only just launching at the time the Game Boy arrived.

The market was Nintendo's, and third-party licensees must have been giddy at the prospect of a new platform to expand their properties into — especially given Nintendo's harsh restrictions on the number of new NES titles publishers could release each year. That five-game allowance kept the market from becoming glutted, but it also meant more prolific publishers weren't raking in as much cash as they would have liked. The Game Boy wasn't the NES, but it was the next best thing to a lifted NES embargo — and it being a Nintendo platform, all those exclusivity promises that went along with being a Nintendo licensee carried over as well. Nintendo had created a hermetically sealed business environment; the Game Boy didn't disrupt that ecosystem, merely annexed it.

But the Game Boy wasn't simply a portable NES, and developers had to give careful consideration to the system's relative deficiencies. Where the industry as a whole was looking to expand beyond the limitations of 8-bit consoles with the new 16-bit generation, Game Boy represented a step down in terms of processing power, screen resolution, color depth, and visual fidelity. Aside from the mostly forgotten Atari 2600, which was seeing less than a dozen new releases per year by 1989, the Game Boy was the most underpowered system on the market. It posed a special challenge to developers: How to create a console-quality experiene on a machine with only a fraction of the NES's capabilities?

As we saw with Super Mario Land and Castlevania: The Adventure, it was a tricky task. Both games launched more or less simultaneously with their respective third NES entries, both of which are considered highwater marks for 8-bit video game design. Neither Game Boy spin-off lived up to that standard. Super Mario Land was great in its own right, but its tiny graphics and imprecise physics made it feel like a bootleg Mario — a fact Nintendo R&D1 embraced for its sequels, eventually shifting the focus to villain Wario, himself a bootleg Mario. Castlevania fared far worse, with sluggish action and a bizarrely stripped-down character upgrade system that reduced a legitimate, Konami-developed entry in the series to the level of a tepid clone like 8 Eye's or Master of Darkness.

While fairly straight NES-to-Game Boy conversions didn't turn out so well, there was nevertheless hope. The Final Fantasy Legend took a very forgiving approach to the RPG, allowing players the unprecedented ability to save anywhere and even incorporating a

feature equivalent to “lives” for each party member. Its generally forgiving nature allowed its designers to experiment wildly with its mechanics, resulting in one of the weirdest and most interesting RPGs ever.

And of course, Tetris proved to be an even better fit for Game Boy than for NES. It neatly showcased the system’s Link Cable — a true killer app — and its design complemented the natural play patterns of Game Boy. Slogging through an hour-long play session with that grimy screen was never fun, but a 10-minute pick-up-and-play puzzle session?

In time, the NES/Game Boy relationship would evolve. A handful of studios dared to produce straight NES-to-Game Boy conversions, such as Brøderbund’s The Battle of Olympus — questionable, but admirable. Far more interesting were the smartly designed companion games, such as Metroid II. While it suffered a few missteps, Metroid II changed up the design of the original NES adventure to a linear and direct style. It worked because it better fit the rhythms of Game Boy life. And then there was Bionic Commando, which offered the best of both worlds: A great NES game smartly reconfigured for portable play.

Perhaps Game Boy’s biggest original triumph in its early days, however, came in the form of Gargoyle’s Quest: A spin-off from Ghosts ‘N Goblins (which had gone from arcade oddity to smash hit on NES) that toned down the difficulty and presented a more adventurous design. It was such a success, in fact, that its sequel took the form of a fullfledged NES game. In any case, the portable/console duality became the backbone of Nintendo’s business for the 25 years… and by all appearances, will be the defining feature of its upcoming NX console.

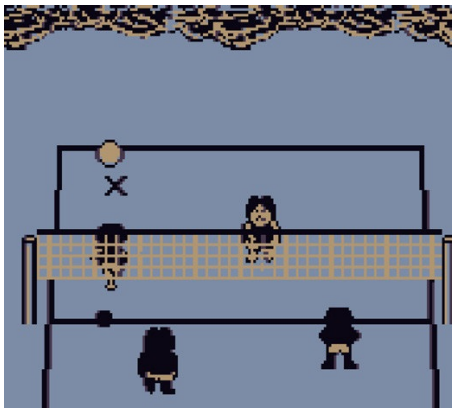
Malibu Beach Volleyball

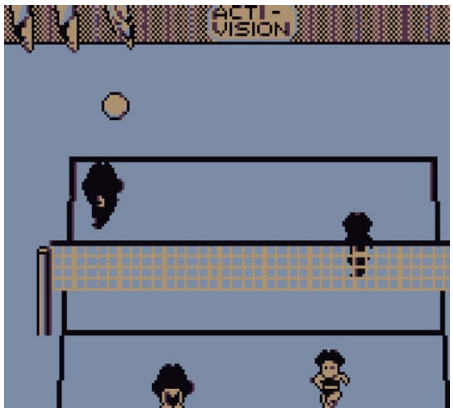
Japanese title: *Seaside Volley* • シーサイドバレー

Developer: TOSE/Tokyo Shoseki

Publisher: Tonkin House [JP] Activision [US]

Release date: 10.31.1989 [JP] | 3.1990 [US]





Volleyball is one of the worst possible sports you can turn into a video game. That's probably why there are so few of them; to the best of my reckoning, this is the only one that ever appeared on the original Game Boy.

As a sport, volleyball comes in a few different forms: Either the standard Olympic version with six members per team, or beach volleyball with two. In its Olympic form, volleyball has the same field presence as basketball or soccer, but the action is contained in a much smaller space. The confined court leaves little room or time for maneuvering, and the action largely consists of the ball being passed around. Unlike soccer or basketball, volleyball doesn't allow for possession in any sense, so there's no dribbling.

In terms of expressing this as a video game, volleyball basically amounts to bouncing a ball around and trying to set up a quick attack at the net. There's not really a lot you can do with this in a video game without diluting the quick, reflexive nature of volleyball. And yet the late '80s saw a huge number of volleyball-based games, which probably had everything to do with the shirtless beach volleyball scene in Top Gun.

Beach volleyball at least offers a fighting chance at a decent video game. By reducing the number of team members to two, it allows for more active zone defense, which translates to the player having more opportunity to do something besides pingpong the ball around. This, then, is the direction Malibu Beach Volleyball takes. It's not a great adaptation, but god bless 'em, at least developer TOSE gave it the old college try. Malibu Beach lets you play as one of four different two-person national teams as either men or women. In case you weren't clear that this is a game of Japanese origins despite bearing the Activision label, the anime-style women on the title screen and calling matches should clue you in. Also, the male character sprites look completely goofy.

The rules are fairly simple, much like beach volleyball. Your team can bump and set the ball twice before returning it to the other side. If the serving team misses the ball, possession changes to the other team; if the receiving team misses, the servers get a point.

Unlike many volleyball games, Malibu Beach goes with a Tennis-like behindthe-court perspective. Between that and the limited resolution of the Game Boy screen, your perspective on the ball can be rather crippled. In order to make play easier, Malibu Beach denotes the ball's trajectory by marking its landing point with a flashing X. Keeping the ball in play is as simple as standing in front of the X and pressing A. You don't even have to be particularly precise; Malibu Beach incorporates a rather impressive contextual element to play that will cause your players to respond appropriately to the current situation. The second hit in a volley will always be a set, and you'll frequently dive to reach across a distance or save in the wake of a spike by the opposing team. The A button allows you to perform a hit, while the B button causes you to leap. Leaping is great for defending at the front lines, and theoretically is used for spiking on the other team as well.

Unfortunately, the game can be pretty persnickety in how this plays out. While returning and setting the ball is usually fairly forgiving, occasionally the game will not register your actions, or will cause the ball to pass over you if you're standing even a pixel or two forward of the center of the X. This becomes especially true against more advanced teams.

Even more frustrating is the seeming impossibility of performing a spike from your own team member's set. It's pretty easy to leap up and knock down an incoming ball on a shallow trajectory, but good luck actually performing a spike of your own. While preparing for this retrospective, I tried for an hour to perform a spike to no avail.

The computer, of course, has no such trouble. This is really unfortunate, since it means that unless you can crack the inexplicable timing of spikes, the game consists of you sending over easy lobs every third hit while defending against the mysteriously capable CPU. Against the lower-tier teams, Japan and Italy, this is no problem. But god help you against Brazil and the USA.

You don't really have any direct influence over the movement of the ball, either. You can hit it and theoretically slam it in an opponent's face, but the trajectory of a serve and a hit alike is determined entirely by where you're standing when you hit it. So you'll see the same hits and arcs from match to match.

The single-player mode is thus maddeningly divided between matches against the low-skill teams, where you can perform the same few actions and completely shut out the other team, and the powerful teams, where you basically have to play tight defense and wait for the AI to decide it's going to flub one of your returns.

It's not terrible, but it's not great, either. The speed of the action and the tendency of the ball to travel off the screen work against he game, though; the original Game Boy's laggy screen makes it difficult to parse the action, and the game can be deeply frustrating if not played on a later hardware revision (or, ahem, a Super Game Boy).

Activision published Malibu Beach Volleyball in the U.S. and Tonkin House in Japan. In the U.S., a development credit appears for Tokyo Shoseki, which was a division of Tonkin House that had primarily produced educational titles for Famicom. Tonkin House reportedly absorbed Tokyo Shoseki shortly afterwards. The only game that appears under their credits after Malibu Beach Volleyball is a single PC Engine title.

As I mentioned before, many listings credit ghost house TOSE with the development of Malibu Beach Volleyball. Although the company takes no direct credit for the game, the claim is best borne out by the fact that Seaside Volley was included in a 1996 compilation of Tonkin House sports games called Sports Collection, an omnibus that was indeed put together by TOSE. Not that it really matters to anyone but a dedicated video game archivist. Malibu Beach Volleyball is one of the countless forgotten Game Boy titles. Decent but not great; a decent distraction, but nothing you'd actively seek out.

Like many Game Boy releases, Malibu Beach Volleyball was good enough to exist in 1989 but offers no reason to revisit it today aside from the novelty of a Game Boy rendition of one of gaming's less common sports. And also, that sweet super-'90s American box art.

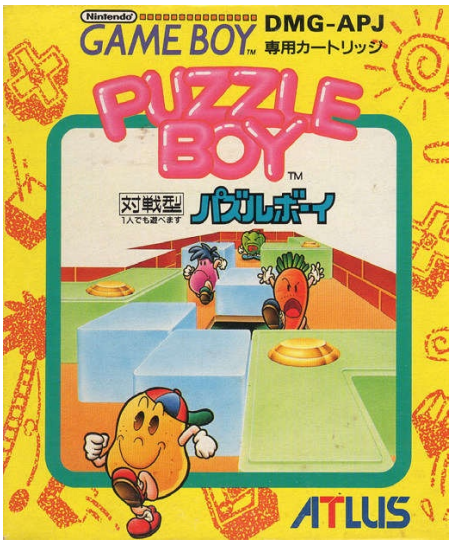
Kwirk

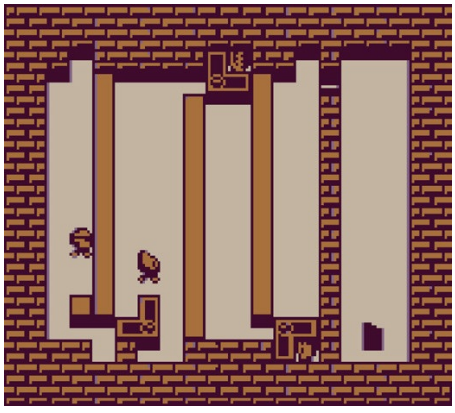
Japanese title: *Puzzle Boy* • パズルボーイ

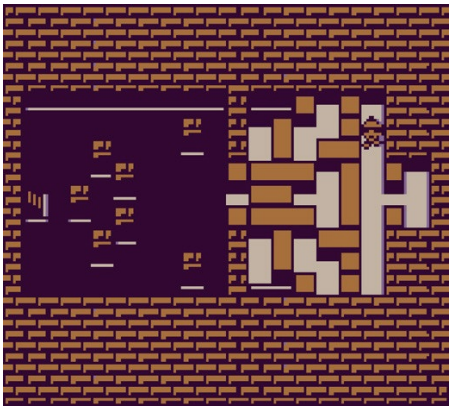
Developer: Atlus

Publisher: Atlus [JP] | Acclaim [US]

Release date: 9.24.1989 [JP] | 3.1990 [US]







When you think of Atlus, you obviously think of the Shin Megami Tensei games, or

maybe just Persona, or — if you are a righteous and god-fearing human — Etrian Odyssey. But like so many developers, Atlus took a while to find its groove; the studio didn't simply spring into existence as a world-class RPG-producing powerhouse. Although the MegaTen series actually dates all the way back to 1987, it didn't become Atlus' primary money-maker until the PlayStation 2 era, almost two decades later. Up until that point, the company made do however it could.

In the 8-bit era, that often involved working on some rather unglamorous contract projects. Heck, even Megami Tensei originally came into the world under the auspices of Namco. Perhaps the most infamous NES creations by Atlus came in the form of some licensed projects for LJN, those world-class purveyors of schlocky and poorly made games based on flash-in-the-pan toy and cartoon licenses. While that might sound ominous for Atlus' legacy, in fact their projects for LJN were quite possibly the best things that particular publisher ever churned out for NES: Jaws and Friday the 13th.

More importantly, those workfor-hire productions gave Atlus the latitude to build its own original creations. Without Friday the 13th, we might never have gotten games like Kwirk. And that would be a darned shame.

Kwirk was a completely original production for Game Boy — kind of a nutty risk, when you think about it. Atlus surely had limited bandwidth in 1989, and they committed a big chunk of it to releasing a new property for a brand-new system. Even with Nintendo's clout and mindshare circa 1989, there was no guarantee Kwirk would become a hit. And indeed, the game seems to have been largely forgotten; in fact, the entire series (called Puzzle Boy in Japan) is probably most notorious for the second entry in the series, 1991's Puzzle Boy II, aka Amazing Tater — one of the rarest and most expensive U.S. releases for Game Boy. Otherwise, Kwirk retains a bit of notoriety for having been part of Acclaim's sad excuse for a Captain N ripoff, The Power Team. About which the less said the better.

But this isn't fair. Kwirk deserves more than simply to be remembered for having a woefully underproduced sequel and being part of one of the most ill-conceived commercials-as-cartoons of the shameless '80s. Weird as the character may have been, the game in which he starred was nothing short of excellent. I would go so far as to call it the single best game for the platform released to date (November 1989) — or at the very least, right on par with Revenge of the Gator.

Much like Revenge of the Gator, Kwirk excels through its specificity. This is not a broad or ambitious game, but rather one that focuses in on a single concept and explores it to brilliant effect. At heart, it owes a great deal to Boxxle; it plays like a beefedup Soukoban. Where Boxxle felt sluggish and limited, being based so faithfully on a PC game from the early '80s, Kwirk incorporates both a snappy pace and much more complex and varied mechanics.

Where Boxxle had you pushing 1×1 boxes, Kwirk takes the concept of shoving things to a new level. You're still limited to pushing objects rather than pulling, but these can take much more complex and elaborate forms — they can be larger, wider, longer, asymmetrical, whatever. You can shove them into holes in the floor to create ersatz walkways. Some boxes are bolted to the ground on a pivot point, effectively becoming

turnstiles that rotate 90 degrees at a time and create dynamic obstructions even as they allow you to pass through.

And to get really tricky, many stages feature Kwirk's vegetable pals, requiring you to swap between multiple characters to solve puzzles. Your goal in Kwirk is always to reach an exit rather than simply to move boxes to predetermined locations, and when you play with multiple characters every participant in the puzzle has to reach the end — not just Kwirk himself. Needless to say, these puzzles grow remarkably complex and elaborate quite quickly. Unlike many previous Game Boy puzzlers, though, Kwirk never feels like it's working against you. The difficulty comes in the intricacy of the puzzles themselves, not because you move so glacially (Boxxle) or have to deal with more information than you can see at once (Hyper Lode Runner). Kwirk feels responsive, and when you screw up you can simply reset the puzzle with no penalties.

Kwirk features a wealth of options, too. In addition to the dozens of standard levels, it also includes almost 100 stages in a secondary mode that challenges you to complex multiple consecutive puzzles as quickly as possible. This second mode allows for a head-to-head competitive mode to see who can make the best time working their way through the various labyrinths. Puzzle games by nature have a finite shelf life, but the addition of so many extras as well as a competitive mechanics adds tremendous legs to this little adventure.

The loving care invested in this game manifests in its attention to graphical detail, too. Sure, it features tiny sprites and geometric graphics, but you have a choice of presentation options. You can play in a straightforward top-down viewpoint that allows you a clean, uncluttered, overhead perspective on the action, or you can give it a Zelda-like false perspective that adds some depth and dimension to everything without interfering with the gameplay.

All in all, Kwirk is a real standout in the early days of the Game Boy. Yet despite its pioneering status, it's largely been forgotten in the mists of time. Perhaps more than any other Game Boy title we've looked at to date, Kwirk deserves more attention and love. It's solidly made and wonderfully entertaining. And it even kind of ties back into Atlus' contract work for LJN, since U.S. publisher Acclaim absorbed LJN shortly after. See, it's all connected.

Golf

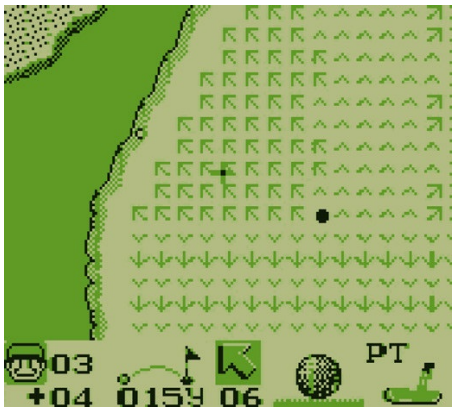
Japanese title: *Golf* • ゴルフ

Developer: Nintendo R&D1/Intelligent Systems

Publisher: Nintendo

Release date: 11.28.1989 [JP] | 2.1990 [US] | 1990 [EU]

Super Game Boy: Enhanced color palette



The testament of a great game: Even if you don't care about the subject matter or genre, a player can still appreciate its quality and refinement. So it goes with Golf, a game that revolves around the topic of its very literal title and does so with far more style and panache that its generic name would suggest.

Like Baseball and Tennis, Game Boy Golf appears to be an adaptation of the NES title by the same name. But it's miles better than the NES original, while at the same time building on its foundation. That's no minor factor here, given that Nintendo's NES Golf basically established the template for modern golf games. The stroke/power meter it introduced remain a key element of the genre to this date. That's 30 years of history it created right there… and as with so many pioneering works, everything that surrounded that innovative idea was fairly mundane.

Golf, on the other hand, renders the concepts laid down on NES with greater detail, smoother play, a better visual layout. It's a pleasure to play… and this from someone who doesn't know or like Golf, and barely comprehends the sport.

Don't expect Golf to hold your hand if you don't know the nuances of the realworld sport. You're given a standard array of clubs and sent out onto one of two courses (USA or Japan) without so much as a how-doyou-do. The clubs you can select from run the standard gamut of wedges, irons, woods, and putters, but unless you understand the proper use of all those different devices you'll need to do some due diligence to get properly up to speed.

I suspect that's the developers' biases (or interests) showing. Unlike most sports games, Golf stands a pretty good chance of being enjoyed in real life by its designers. Whereas game programmers probably don't indulge in a lot of professional soccer or hockey, golf is the great equalizer. Anyone can learn to hit the ball properly and read the wind, provided they make the effort… and Japan does love golf. Baseball game designers generally get into that line of work because they like watching baseball, but golf designers actually stand a good chance of playing the sport themselves.

That makes for a higher barrier to entry in this pre-tutorial-era portable title full of abbreviations and truncated text, but it also makes for a richer, more satisfying adaptation of the sport. It's remarkably detailed for an early Game Boy release, forcing players to contend with a number of variables. Besides the fancy club selection, you also have to worry about the direction of the wind, the layout of the course — sand traps, water hazards, rough grass, trees rising into the y-axis — and even the three-dimensional pitch and friction of the green.

As if that weren't enough of a case for Golf's quality, consider the fact that it's the first Game Boy title to include battery back-up. Players can save their progress at practically any point and resume later without needing to worry about toting around a notebook full of passwords. We're still in the '80s, here, and battery back-ups were generally a sign of a particularly intricate game into which its developer had invested a fair amount of effort and confidence. Golf was no mere flyby-night take on the sport; it was meant to be an engrossing, involved rendition.

Like many Game Boy titles, Golf lacks proper credits, either in-game or out. Intelligent Systems claims credit for Golf on its website, making this another Intelligent

Systems/Nintendo R&D1 joint venture, but aside from the music credit to “Hip” Tanaka there are no other staff credits available for Golf. On possibility for lead designer is Kenji Miki of Nintendo R&D2, who developed both NES Golf and NES Open Tournament Golf in 1991. On one hand, Miki has only ever been directly affiliated with Nintendo R&D2 and EAD; on the other, he has been listed as a manager or producer on several Nintendo golf projects since NES Open Tournament Golf, and he’s overseen several Intelligent Systems projects such as Paper Mario.

While we may never know the full details of Golf’s origins, the game does feel like a perfect midpoint between NES Golf and NES Open Tournament Golf. It’s detailed enough to appeal to dedicated duffers while being simple enough that a links novice can pick it up in a few rounds.

Of all the Game Boy sports titles we’ve seen to date, Golf is the first that remains legitimately entertaining decades later. It’s a bit primitive compared to modern golf titles and lacks the RPG elements of Nintendo’s more recent takes on the sport, but in truth it’s not an unbearably limited. She may not look like much, but she’s got it where it counts.

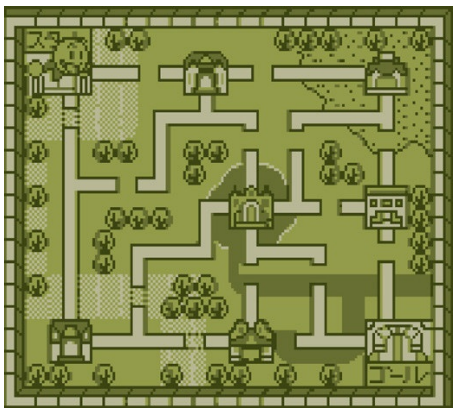
Pachinko Time

Japanese title: パチンコTIME

Developer: Marionette

Publisher: Coconuts Japan

Release date: 12.8.1989 [JP]



For those not in the know, pachinko is a popular Japanese gambling pastime. Legally, it's not considered gambling, and any time someone suggests the authorities crack down on the very extensive and very notorious gambling culture around the hobby, it's always met with sputters of feigned disbelief. Pachinko and crime are closely interlinked, but honestly it's about as benign a front-end for organized law-breaking as you could possibly imagine. Does the Yakuza have ties to pachinko and the ease with which you can swap your non-

monetary winnings for cold, hard cash? Yeah, probably. But Vegas has mob ties, too, and the main difference between a pachinko parlor and a Vegas casino is that the former is likely to be much better lit and generally less depressing.

But the idea is still the same. Pensioners drop coin after coin into games of random chance, hoping for a big payout. Slots and pachinko aren't exactly the same thing, but they're founded on common principles. Both boil down to sheer luck, yet both give players a vague sense of agency and control by allowing a moderate degree of interaction. With slots, it's about when you pull the level that determines (in theory) the outcome of the reels. With pachinko, it's where you fire balls.

Actually, pachinko gives a little more control to the player. A pachinko machine generally consists of a decorative backboard embedded with hundreds of tiny nails that create paths through which steel ball bearings drop. If they drop into the machine's gutter, too bad, they're lost. But if they fall into specific holes, your score rises. If you've seen Plinko on The Price is Right, you've seen a tremendously simplified version of pachinko. The real thing, however, has much more elaborate nail paths and introduces many more opportunities for chaotic interactions between balls, nails, force, and gravity.

The player's control over a pachinko game boils down to aiming the ball. This works a bit like pinball, as the ball shoots up a ramp and the amount of force you use determines where on the field it lands. The difference, however, is that in pinball you keep working with that one ball once it enters the field. In pachinko, it's just one little soldier on a relentless onslaught as you plaster the machine with ball after ball in the hopes of landing as many as possible in the targets.

It's not so difficult, then, to grasp the appeal of pachinko in its basic form. Sure, it's all about getting lucky, but it does involve some element of skill based on your ability to keep the stream of balls on target. And there's always the possibility that if you do really well, you can talk to some shady guy for a cash payout… unofficially, of course. And that's probably why Tokyo's pachinko parlors have a line around the block when they open up every morning.

But as with slot machines, once you render the experience into computerized form, the appeal becomes harder to explain. Remove the actual physicality of the game and replace it with a virtualized version, and suddenly it's not about getting a feel for the machine and learning to hit the nails just so. Instead, it boils down to a mechanical process in which you hope the computer's physics simulation works in your favor. It's a fine difference, but an essential one.

And so we have Pachinko Time, brought to you by the fine folks at Marionette and Coconuts Japan. Pachinko Time is virtual pachinko, and therefore fundamentally more or less pointless, so far as I can see. I say this not out of cultural ignorance because it's a Japanese thing I don't get; I also don't understand the appeal of solo casino video games. Video poker against an online opponent? Sure. Imaginary slot machines? Nope.

You have to give developer Marionette points for trying, at least. Pachinko Time aims big, offering up more than 100 different imaginary pachinko machines. Each machine possesses a startling level of detail — you can zoom in for a close-up view of the nail patterns — and the whole thing is tied together with a mini-adventure game framework in

which you take control of a living pachinko ball who needs to complete at least three machines per region in order to move on.

Unfortunately, that's about the best I can say for Pachinko Time. Those morethan-100 "different" machines aren't actually all that different; each nail pattern repeats several times, with only fine distinctions between them — so far as I can tell, some have subtle differences in the patterns, while other have different objections. But the "gameplay" boils down to holding the A button to launch a seemingly endless stream of pachinko balls.

The rules are simple: You have two numbers to work with. One is your finite number of balls, and the second is the score you have to whittle down by hitting targets. Your goal is to reduce the score to zero before your ball counter hits zero first. Each ball you launch deducts one from your stock, and if it rolls into the gutter the debit is permanent. On the other hand, if you hit a target you gain back a large number of balls for your stock. On the easier tables, it's pretty likely that you'll end up with a stock of balls several times that which you began with. Different tables assign different values to the targets, and others have modifiers that affect scoring.

But to be blunt, it's all incredibly boring. Even the easiest machines take 15 or 20 minutes to complete, and literally all you're doing is holding down the A button and fine-tuning your aim as the stream of balls drifts slowly over time. Meanwhile, it's accompanied by some of the most irritating music you'll ever hear, looping over and over, with shrill sound effects and flashing visuals that just add to the annoyance.

And yet it seemed to have done well enough for itself. This is only the first of many, many Game Boy pachinko titles to come. And it, in turn, appears to be a spiritual follow-up to Mezase Pachi Pro: Pachio-kun, a Famicom game previously published by Coconuts Japan. Although that particular title had been programmed by C-Dream rather than Marionette, and Pachinko Time doesn't carry over the Pachio-kun name, the conceit of an anthropomorphic pachinko ball going through a lightweight adventure by flinging tiny versions of himself at targets remains consistent between the two. Many of Game Boy's pachinko releases came from the combo of Marionette and Coconuts Japan.

There are some Game Boy games whose failure to make it to the U.S. seems fairly heartbreaking. But somehow, we managed to survive without Pachinko Time.

The Final Fantasy Legend

Japanese title: *Makaitoshi Sa•Ga* • 魔界塔士 Sa•Ga

Developer: Squaresoft

Publisher: Squaresoft

Release date: 12.15.1989 [JP] | 9.30.1990 [US]

Akitoshi Kawazu may be my all-time favorite video game auteur. He’s not your typical Hideo Kojima or David Cage, though — no film-obsessed designer whose predilections

revolve around the synthesis of two forms of media. Kawazu's quirks, his specific flavors of madness, reside purely on the mechanical side of things. He stands apart as an auteur because of his obsession with the game element of video games.

Perhaps more than any other single designer, Kawazu fixates on the relationship between video games and tabletop or penand-paper games. Sure, other people make video games based on tabletop brands and concepts, but Kawazu takes a different approach. He attempts to marry the unpredictability and complexity of those formats — the randomness of dice roles, the labyrinthine rules of a bookshelf full of Dungeons & Dragons manuals — into console RPG, a medium defined by its drive to simplify, to reduce, to automate, to streamline.

No work better represents the mad passion of Kawazu than 2003's Unlimited Saga, a game that (I've been told by people in the know) he created even as he openly admitted it would be wildly unpopular. Unlimited Saga was the defiant last attempt of an old-guard designer to exert his singular perspective on the medium even as he was being pushed out of development and into management. The work of a man determined to burn the currency of a decade and a half of seniority within the company he helped build on his own personal expression.

Unlimited Saga is a mess of a game. It makes little sense, and makes even less effort to explicate its workings to the player. It's bewildering. Befuddling. And yet, beneath the opacity of it all, you can see certain mechanisms at work — consistent rules and reliably chaotic operations. Unlimited Saga makes a twisted sort of sense, if you understand its foundation.

And this is that foundation: The Final Fantasy Legend. Or, as it's called in Japan, Makaitoshi Sa•Ga.

Actually, Final Fantasy Legend could be seen as the foundation for a lot of things. Not only for the long-running SaGa series, but also for portable role-playing games in general. Before Legend, handhelds had never seen such a deep, complex video game. Nintendo's Golf was about as dense as it got… and while that was a pretty meaty piece of work, especially considering it was a portable sports title, it had nothing on Legend.

The sprawling world of Final Fantasy Legend encompasses half a dozen different lands, all contained in a mind-bending fashion inside of a tower which simultaneously is contained within each world. At the top of the tower, the Creator — you know, God — waits to meet the intrepid heroes who can climb to its pinnacle. Along the way, though, the party discovers a twisted and contradictory universe: Though Paradise is said to be at the peak of the tower, the first realm you discover beyond the realm of Continent at the tower's base appears to be Paradise: Its residents gush about how they have no need to work or labor, because they live in a care free land. And yet immediately above this seeming perfection is a pitch-black realm where the residents are forever flagellated by immortal demons. Far beyond that, you discover the World of Ruins, which swipes Etrian Odyssey's big plot twist nearly two decades early: The ruins are those of Tokyo, and you go scavenging for old computer parts in "Akiba Town."

It's a strange and surreal take on the RPG, a bizarre hybrid of science-fiction and fantasy, mixing technology and spirituality. This mixture wasn't exactly unheard of among

JRPGs; by the time SaGa launched in Japan in 1989, Atlus and Namco's Megami Tensei had already made its debut, bringing magic and demon-summoning into modern-day Tokyo. But if Megami Tensei was modern-day cyberpunk, Final Fantasy Legend was more far-future post-apocalyptic, throwing together a motley array of influences into a stew of monsters, psychic warriors, and punk-haired soldiers wielding swords and bazookas with equal aplomb. It was a defiantly weird RPG… and not just because of the setting. The Final Fantasy Legend played as bizarrely as its story read. Whatever kind of characters you decided to go with, each had its own unique set of mechanics that would alternate empower and embitter you.

Humans, they're nice and steady. They can equip anything you want, be it armor or weapons or just consumable items to use in battle. They can use the best gear, and you can mold them to suit your purposes. But all the great weapons they could take into combat will break down over time — yeah, even punches and kicks, for some reason. The more devastating the gear, the more quickly it degrades, culminating in the amazing Glass Sword that shatters after a single crushing blow.

Oh, and humans don't level up. To make them stronger, you go to the local market and buy consumable potions that confer permanent stat boosts. It's the original pay-to-win situation, with the vast majority of your party budget going toward turning your human character (or if you're feeling like a big spender, characters) into an absolute beast of battle. It's expensive and inconvenient thanks to the soft caps on level boosts, but it allows precise control of your character growth. Do you generalize across the three adaptable stats (strength, hit points, agility)? Or do you double down on one trait to the expense of all else?

Humans are by far the most sci-fi class in the game, too. While they start out wading into the fray with a sword or dagger in hand, eventually they'll start to find handguns, then grenades, then laser swords. And a chainsaw, for some reason.

Monsters, on the other hand, they're much trickier. While their stats are even more fixed than those of humans, monsters grow according to a fixed formula whose inner workings are utterly opaque to the player. It works thus: When you defeat a (non-humanoid) monster, you may have the opportunity to eat the meat it leaves behind. Grim, yeah, but if you try to feed that meat to your party members, nothing will happen… unless the party member in question belongs to the monster race. When a monster eats meat, the fun begins.

Monsters take the phrase "you are what you eat" to a literal extreme. When a monster devours a fallen enemy, it immediately mutates into some other breed of creature. Precisely what kind of creature results, however, may be the single most complex inner working of The Final Fantasy Legend. Each kind of monster falls into a different category, and within each category the monster types are ranked by level tiers. Consuming the meat of a specific type of enemy doesn't simply turn you into that creature; instead, the resulting form your party member takes depends on your own monster's current category and level as well as the specifics of the species you've devoured. You could mutate into a far more powerful form, or you could drop back down through the monster ranks. It's not fair to say that the process is entirely unpredictable, because there are extensive charts and FAQs that lay down the very consistent rules that monster transformations observe. But

it’s not wrong to say the process is inscrutable, even with charts in hand.

Provided you can make sense of these arcade effects, monsters hold fast to the principle of “what you see is what you get.” Each form of monster has a fixed set of skills, stats, and uses for its ability. Monsters can’t carry or use items, and they can’t equip any gear. If you stumble upon a powerful monster form, awesome! But you have to take great care when feeding a monster, because there’s always a chance you could rank down or end up stuck with some creature that’s only good for 10 attacks before needing to rest at an inn.

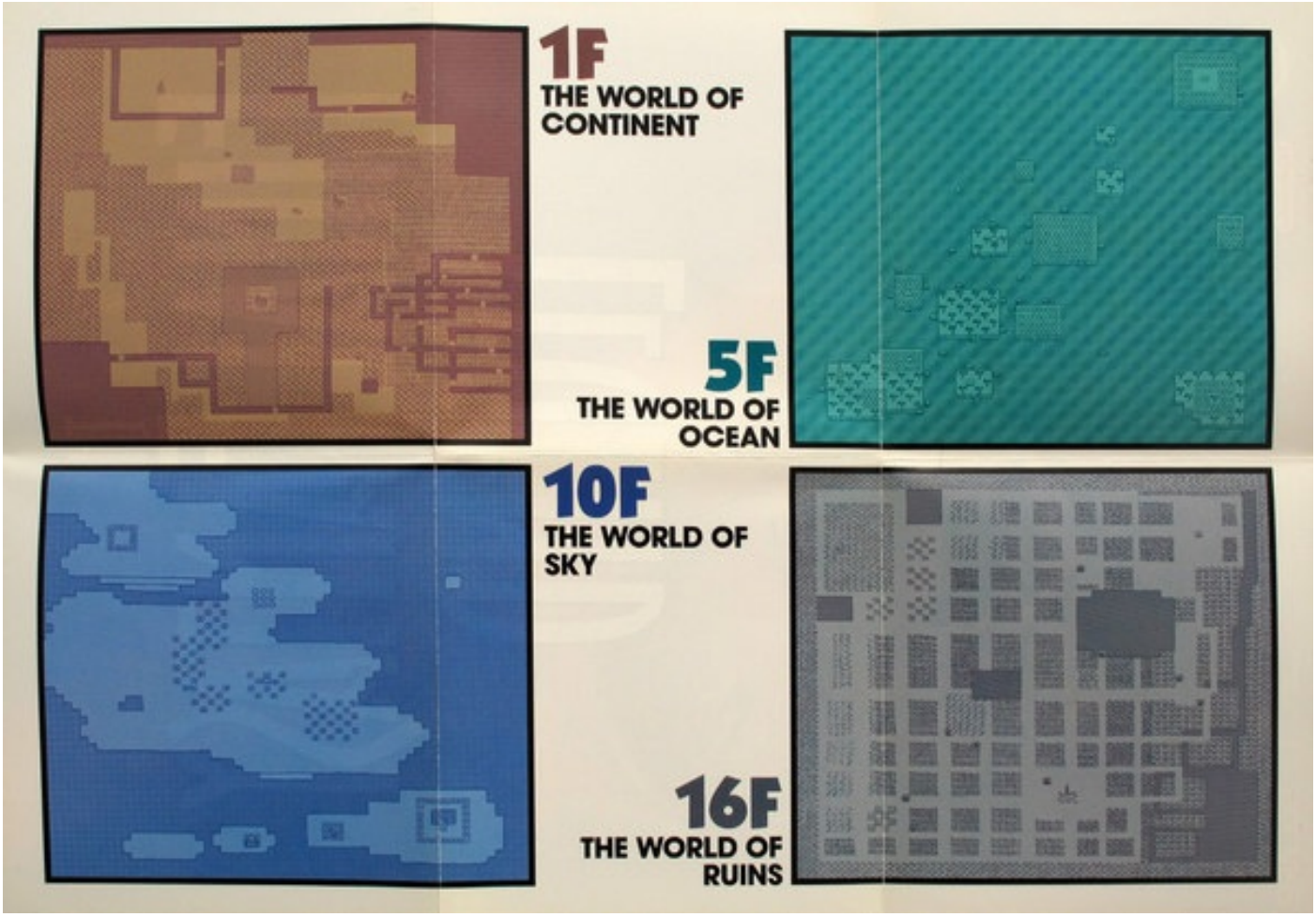
Meanwhile, the final race in the game, mutants, are legitimately as unpredictable as monsters appear to be. Where monsters have fixed stats and skills, and humans are exactly as useful as the investments you make into their abilities, mutants can vary wildly from battle to battle. The first four of a mutant’s eight inventory slots are dedicated to innate skills — not magic spells, exactly, but rather psychic powers that generally work the same as spells (mutants were, incidentally, called espers in Japan).

The thing is, the player has zero control over a mutant’s skills at any given time. They’re a total lottery, and they have a chance of changing after each and every battle. Besides obvious spell-like capabilities such as Flame and toxic Gas, mutants can also develop passive esper powers such as a resistance of vulnerability to elements, the ability to grant the party a higher likelihood of first-strike attacks, and more. The volatile nature of these powers means a mutant party member can suddenly become far and away the deadliest person in your team… and just as quickly be rendered useless by a whim of the random number generator.

That said, mutants change in other ways, too; unlike humans, their stats naturally grow over time. And unlike their spells, a mutant’s stat growth can be affected by your choice of actions in combat. Use spells and a mutant will become more a powerful mage as their mana stat skyrockets. Use a weapon based around agility and their agility stat will grow, making them more effective at wielding that weapon. Take damage in battle and their HP and defensive stats will improve.

If this sounds vaguely familiar, it’s because the mechanics of mutant growth derive largely from Akitoshi Kawazu’s previous project, Final Fantasy II. The mutability of FFII’s underpinnings make it by far the least beloved game in the series, and it seems either Kawazu or Square management realized his ideas about nurture-vs.-nature in RPG design didn’t fit with the mainstream, accessible ambitions the company had for its flagship RPG series. So Kawazu hopped over to Game Boy and created The Final Fantasy Legend instead.

But Legend is a more approachable and less frustrating game all around, because it greatly increases its sense of player agency over FFII. Yes, you never know what a mutant will do next, and monsters are a pain to try and predict… but at the same time, you have total control over your party makeup. You start with a single party member and add more at the local guild office, and can retire your heroes and roll new characters at any time. You can build a party consisting entirely of any one race, or any combination of races. You can choose the gender of your humans and mutants, too.



Fold-out map of the game world included with the U.S. version of The Final Fantasy Legend. The map's reverse side was a poster of the cover art.

On top of that, you can exert some finite control over mutants beyond their stats. Since their inventory slots five through eight never develop innate powers, you can load them down with items to determine their specialization. Want to make them more durable? They can use the same armor as humans. Want them to become heavy-hitters? Give them human weapons and watch their proficiency with the relevant stat rise along with their damage output. Prefer them in a support role? Give them consumables to use in combat. Or you can buy magic tomes that have set numbers of uses and ensure your mutants can always use those powerful group-attack skills or healing spells.

Another massive boon for The Final Fantasy Legend is the inclusion of a battery back-up for save-anywhere flexibility. Recognizing the intricacy of the game and the needs of portable play, the Legend team threw out the idea that players should only be able to save in inns or towns; Legend lets you record your progress anywhere, so long as you're outside of combat or a dialogue sequence. So if you're worried about your monster becoming useless or your mutant losing their best skills, you can save frequently and reload as needed. Of course, like many other things about the game, this introduces the possibility that you can totally screw yourself over if you save with no resources and no health in the depths of a dungeon…

…but that's part of Legend's appeal. It operates on a combination of hands-off respect for player agency and enough randomization to keep you on your toes. It's a remarkably complex take on the RPG, which makes its status as the world's first portable RPG all the more surprising. It would quickly be followed by the much more traditional The Sword of

Hope, but you have to respect Kawazu and his team for not making their creation toothless just because they were traveling in unexplored territory. If anything, I suspect they found the frontier nature of Game Boy enabling. Who could say what could and couldn't be done with their game? What precedent was there? Whereas FFII felt like a betrayal in many ways of the original Final Fantasy, Legend — or rather, Sa•Ga — had no legacy to be accountable to.

Which, again, isn't to suggest that the game went wildly off the rails. Despite all its unconventional elements, the physically impossible world, the weirdness of mutants and monsters, the blunt and often sarcastic comments by the player's party members… despite these things, most of the game revolves around fighting enemies. And there, at least, The Final Fantasy Legend plays it straight. Underneath it all, Legend's battles play much like those of contemporary Dragon Quests: Turn-based, first-person view, with groups of like enemy types represented through a single sprite. Standard role-playing mechanics apply, with totally typical status effects like blindness and poison showing up, single- and group-based attacks available, and stats determining turn order and attack efficacy.

And that, I think, is why The Final Fantasy Legend ultimately works. It anchors its unconventional ideas to time-tested industry standards, making it less some bizarre reinvention of the RPG and more of a variation on a theme. Certainly it stands out thanks to its place in history, but the game remains surprisingly playable 25 years later as a result of its innate normalcy. Who knows — there are probably some kids out there for whom Legend served as an entry point to the RPG genre, and they still wonder why other takes on the format seem so mundane by comparison.

In any case, The Final Fantasy Legend received two sequels on Game Boy, and the SaGa series continued with Romancing SaGa for Super Famicom and SaGa Frontier for PlayStation. And, of course, Unlimited Saga. Along the way, the conventions of the franchise were refined. Things like Life Points, which allowed for permanent character death, returned from time to time. Races continued to play a role, with the addition of the Mech race in later titles. Mutability and experiential growth took an even bigger part, with characters potentially learning skills on the fly (including attack combos) based on their combat actions. Legend even saw a remake in Japan on WonderSwan; that version remained faithful to the original, but offered a little more transparency (like giving players a better idea of what their meat choices would cause their monster allies to morph into).

But at no point has the SaGa series apologized for its own nature. It is its own creature, and it has been since the beginning. You don't have to love The Final Fantasy Legend, but you have to respect it.

LOCKED IN, BUT NOT LOCKED OUT

It may seem hard to believe in this day and age, where Nintendo stands more or less alone as the sole first-party manufacturer to incorporate region-locking into their systems, but once upon a time the Game Boy stood apart by being the only major system on the market without regional limitations. The NES, Super NES, Genesis, and TurboGrafx-16 all used a variety of mechanisms to restrict games to being played in the territory of their origins; the NES in particular used both a physical lockout mechanism (its carts were twice the size of and a different shape than those of the Japanese Famicom) as well as a special security chip, the 10NES, which required a special "handshake" code absent in Famicom software. By contrast, the Game Boy felt downright liberating in the freedom it offered.

But it would make sense that of all platforms, the Game Boy would avoid needless regional differences. The very nature of the system begged for flexibility: No matter where in the world Game Boy owners traveled, they could be sure to find fresh entertainment. Even the technical limitations that kept European releases of Japanese and U.S. console games from an optimal state were irrelevant on Game Boy; the differences between European PAL and Western/Japanese NTSC video signals were strictly tied to broadcast signals for cathode-ray devices. The Game Boy with its integral screen used the same video standard across all territories. Aside from language barriers, there was nothing to prevent avid gamers from importing and enjoying releases from other countries.

In fact, that became its own submarket in the Game Boy's latter days. As the system wound down in the mid-'90s, before the Pokémon renaissance, U.S. retailers often sold Japanese releases such as Go! Go! Tank. Action-oriented 8-bit games in Japan often featured only fragments of English in-game, and it wasn't unusual to pick up a cheap Game Boy release circa 1995 only to discover it was actually an import.

Despite the lack of region barriers, the Game Boy did feature a physical lock that eventually became a lock-out: The On/Off switch was a physical slider that would secure a cartridge in place by clicking into a notch on the upper-right of a cartridge when set to "on." Not only did this prevent games from coming loose during play, it also prevented incompatible Game Boy Color carts from being used in old systems: GBC-exclusive carts lacked the notch, preventing the system from powering on.

"Off" position / "On" position

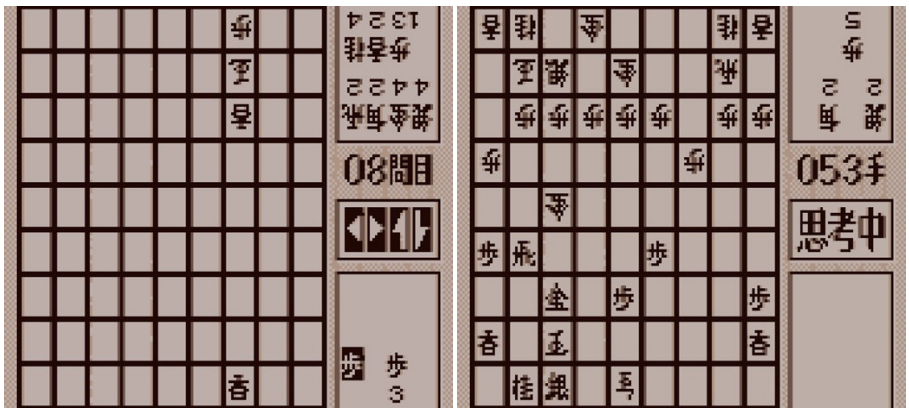
SHOGI

Japanese title: *Shogi* • 将棋

Developer: Pony Canyon

Publisher: Pony Canyon

Release date: 12.19.1989 [JP]



Shogi was the third Game Boy release to revolve around an endemic Japanese pastime, and the third Game Boy release never to see a release in the West. It's almost like there's a pattern evolving, or something. As we venture further into the Game Boy's life, the disparity between Japanese and Western releases will grow considerably; in these early days, however, the simplicity of Game Boy releases and the uniformity of the system's global market meant most releases showed up in all territories.

It’s quite a change, in terms of Nintendo system strategies, from the Famicom/ NES schism. The NES launched in America almost three years after the Famicom’s debut, so the earliest Famicom releases were almost entirely Japan-exclusive; by the time the NES arrived, those formative works were entirely too primitive to bother localizing. But with the American Game Boy lagging a mere year behind the Japanese launch, it made sense for publishers to translate pretty much everything they had… especially if there was little to no text.

Japanese pastimes like shogi, however, stood as the exception. Like Yakuman and Pachinko Time before it, Pony Canyon’s Shogi featured a tabletop game that’s never found its way beyond Asia… though in this case, it’s not because shogi is particularly unique to Japan but rather because the West already has its own variant: Chess. The two classic games are essentially the same thing, minus some differences in rules and aesthetics. But the two are sufficiently redundant that Americans have no need for shogi… yet sufficiently different that publishers can’t just reskin a shogi game and pass it off as chess, either.

Another similarity between Shogi, Yakuman, and Pachinko Time: This Game Boy release was a part of something akin to a tradition for its publisher, Pony Canyon. Just as Nintendo had released a few mahjong games before Yakuman and Coconuts Japan was all about dressing up virtual pachinko with the trappings of an adventure game, Pony Canyon specialized in shogi titles. They’d already released several variants for Famicom by 1989, many endorsed by well-known shogi experts. (Alas, former Nintendo president Hiroshi Yamauchi — reputed to be a world-class player of the game — was not among them.)

Shogi, then, was a publisher dipping its toes into a new market with a known quantity. Of course, Pony Canyon, also known as FCI and a part of the massive Fujisankei media conglomerate, had already made its Game Boy debut with Boxxle, already a known quantity of sorts as well. But this was a rather conservative effort for the company, a guaranteed seller to a small but dedicated and reliable audience. Like Harvest Moon, sort of.

Unsurprisingly, there’s nothing particularly exciting about this adaptation of shogi. It’s as bare-bones as you can get; the standard game allows solo or competitive play, and you can choose whether you move first or second. A second mode allows you to try to solve dozens of different play scenarios. You can “rewind” the game to step back through your moves and try for other outcomes if you screw up, which of course is horribly dishonorable but awfully tempting nevertheless.

And that’s it. There’s no tutorial mode, and the visuals are incredibly minimalistic. The board barely fits into the Game Boy’s screen resolution, and the pieces within the board not only lack the traditional arrowhead shape of shogi tiles — essential for denoting player possession — they also display only one of each piece’s two defining kanji.

Which is to say, this is not a game for newcomers to the hobby. Shogi is even more complex than chess, and Pony Canyon’s adaptation offers no leeway for the inexperienced. It also requires the patience of a grandmaster as well; the further you get into a game, and the greater the advantage you gain over the CPU, the longer the artificial intelligence takes to run through its routines and decide on a move. Even as a raw novice,

I managed to back the computer into a corner a few times, which resulted in me sitting in silence for two or three minutes (Shogi features no music behind the title screen and introductory fanfare, though it does feature some satisfying samples of “checkmate” exclamations and the clacking of tiles on the board) while the system tried to figure out its best move.

It’s surely a familiar refrain by now: Shogi is an unremarkable and unexciting adaptation of a well-known pastime. There’s nothing about it to excite players today. But in 1989, this was as good as portable shogi games got. Not exactly a glowing recommendation, but when you have the field to yourself, “barely adequate” can be enough.

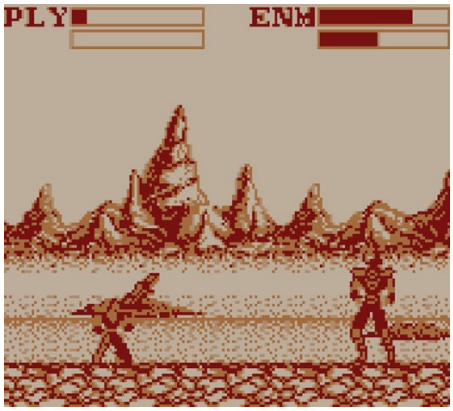
Fist of the North Star: 10 Big Brawls for the King of the Universe

Japanese title: *Hokuto no Ken: Seizetsu Juuban Shoubu* • 北斗の拳 凄絶十番勝負

Developer: Shouei System

Publisher: Toei Animation

Release date: 12.22.1989 [JP] | 4.1990 [US]



Here's what you need to know about Fist of the North Star, if you're unfamiliar with the concept: It's based heavily on the Road Warrior/Mad Max movies. And it's written by a guy who adopted the nom de plume Buronson. Yes, that's how you write "Bronson" in Japanese. As in, Charles Bronson.

In other words, Fist of the North Star is steeped in a veneration for Western clichés of rugged machismo that remains prevalent in Japan even today, 30 years after Fist made its debut. It's the same fascination with American tough guys that causes Boss Coffee to line an increasingly haggard Tommy Lee Jones' pockets with advertising cash, the same fascination lampooned in the "Lat Pack!" commercial shoot scenes of Lost in Translation. It's funny, as they say, because it's true.

Fist of the North Star basically works like this: In the year 199X, humanity all but destroyed itself in a nuclear war, one that left the Statue of Liberty's head buried in a desert. Years later, clusters of survivors cling to what resources they can scrounge, but the wilds are ruled by thugs and gangsters who prey on the weak.

Enter Kenshiro, a stoic man with scars in the shape of the Big Dipper on his chest. Kenshiro is one of three master-level practitioners of a secret killing art that causes its victims' bodies to explode from within — a power demonstrated early on in one of anime's most iconic scenes as Kenshiro rapidly punches a massive thug who laughs at his attack only to burst like a blood balloon as Kenshiro admonishes, "Omae wa mo shindeiru": "You are already dead."

OK, yeah, it's badass. But it's also hilarious for how seriously it takes its over-thetop presentation. Like Dragon Ball and countless other martial arts combat manga tales, Fist of the North Star pits Kenshiro against endless waves of tough guys who woefully underestimate his talents and die violently as a result, punctuated by ever-escalating threats who pose a true challenge to Kenshiro.

So, wandering fighter battles through waves of mooks before taking on a string of bosses who know powerful special techniques. You better believe this makes a perfect video game setup, and Toei Animation was quick to seize on that fact. Fist's run as an anime and manga phenomenon spanned the '80s, meaning that (again, like Dragon Ball) its greatest popularity neatly coincided with the rise of Japanese console games. The Famicom saw no less than four Famicom titles based on the property, and plenty of other platforms saw their share as well.

In fact, Fist of the North Star was the second game based on a manga or anime property to make its way to the U.S. with the license intact, the first being Golgo-13. Just a few short months before Toei's Game Boy take on the property hit Japan, Taxan published Hokuto no Ken 2 for Famicom in the U.S. under the name Fist of the North Star. This coincided with Viz Comics' first of several failed attempts to localize the manga in the U.S. — not unlike Golgo 13: Top Secret Episode, which followed on the heels of Viz's brief run of Golgo 13 two-episode graphic novels.

The '80s were a weird, pioneering time for manga and anime localization in America. Fans flocked to small conventions, circulated third-generation video cassette tapes subtitled by amateurs with access to expensive titling machines, and obsessed over whatever Viz and Antarctic Press managed to produce. We hadn't yet witnessed the

baffling glory of Akira, nor the inspirational and fashionable shenanigans of Sailor Moon. Nerds hadn't yet been forced to question their sexuality for finding Ranma-chan sexy, nor were we yet willing to admit the fact that the term "Japanimation," though clever, also lent itself to an unfortunately racist reading.

Anime was about to E-X-P-L-OD-E in America in 1990, when Fist of the North Star: 10 Big Brawls for the King of the Universe debuted on American Game Boys, but it wasn't quite there yet. So the fact that published Electro Brain made no effort to obscure the game's decidedly foreign nature makes it stand out. The usual airbrushed art of muscle-bound 40-year-olds that replaced manga-style box art in the U.S. was nowhere to be seen; instead, Kenshiro and his nine foes appeared as themselves, faithful to their animation model sheets.

It didn't hurt, of course, that Fist's art style was of a decidedly different form than the stereotypical big-eyed waifs that decorated most Japanese 8-bit game boxes; being a violent seinen manga, Fist presented its characters with lanky proportions and eyes narrowed in grim seriousness. It was Japanese, but it wasn't, you know, JAPANESE.

Which means, in its small way, 10 Big Brawls for the King of the Universe (or 10 Big Brawls for the King of Universe — the box says the former, the title screen the latter) helped to precipitate the anime boom that slowly spread across America in the '90s.

That being said, there was nothing particularly manga-ish about the game itself. It dispensed with anything resembling story or context, stripping the Fist of the North Saga down to its bare minimum: 10 big brawls, as indicated in the title, against the various high-powered foes Kenshiro faced throughout the series. Gone were the levels packed with pointless weaklings; instead, 10 Big Brawls took the form of a fighting game, pitting Kenshiro — or any of the bosses! — against nine sequential opponents in single-screen backgrounds that nicely recreated the iconic artwork of the manga. From dojos to bizarre rock outcroppings to outlandish futuristic fortresses, the background helped set the scene for the fights.

The characters didn't look too bad, either. 10 Big Brawls was developed by Shouei System, the same studio responsible for the NES and Famicom games, and it carried across the lean, stylized sprite art. Unfortunately, it also carried across the crappy physics and controls and collision and AI, too.

10 Big Brawls was Game Boy's first anime-based game as well as its first fighting game, and it didn't exactly set a high water mark for either category. Characters had a limited repertoire of moves — punch, kick, charge attack — and some fighters lacked even that. While you could technically take on the world with your choice of fighter, playing as any character without a projectile move was a shortcut to failure.

Combat in 10 Big Brawls essentially boils down to two strategies. If you're facing off against a melee-only fighter, you keep your distance while charging attacks, leaping over them and drawing them forward while tossing projectiles their way. If you're up against a projectile user, you just need to get them into a loop where they try and charge up their own attack from the other side of the screen. In almost every case, if you toss a projectile from across the screen when the enemy's charge meter is between 2/3 and 3/4 full, their AI will have locked them into a commitment to use their ranged attack, so they'll toss

their wave fist or whatever while taking a faceful of your own attack.

There's some small variety in enemy patterns — some guys like to throw projectiles while ducking, while others prefer standing — but basically combat is essentially impossible to win without cheesing it. And yet, god love 'em, Shouei System tried. They incorporated an experience system and a password scheme to allow you to level up any of the fighters to level 16, giving them greater strength and endurance. And the multiplayer options are fairly rich, allowing you to go up against another player with as much as a five-on-five tournament.

But honestly, that's about all the good I can say for 10 Big Brawls. It's a historical curiosity, and for kids who were into the idea of fighting games before Street Fighter II came along to show us how to make fighting games good (that would happen a year later), Fist of the North Star was about as tolerable a choice as any other. And yet, thanks to its place in history, it's regarded fondly in certain quarters; many gamers experienced their first taste of anime courtesy of 10 Big Brawls. And best of all, there was nowhere for them to go from here but up.

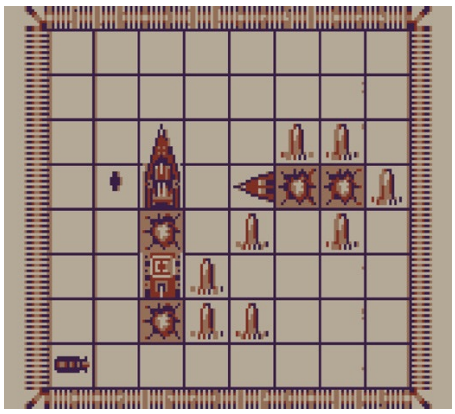
BATTLESHIP

Japanese title: *Kaisen Game: Navy Blue* • 海戦ゲームNAVY BLUE

Developer: Pack-in Video

Publisher: Use Corporation [JP] Mindscape [US]

Release date: 10.29.1989 [JP] | 12.1992 [US]



A popular trick among Western video game publishers during the late ’80s and early ’90s in particular was to buy up a popular license — whether for a toy, a film, a TV series, or some other more esoteric media property — and attach it to an existing Japanese game. Given that Japan entered the NES era three years before the U.S., there were hundreds

upon hundreds of games to choose from for this sort of overhaul.

In a sense, it was simply the flip side of the practice of scouring existing Japanese licenses from games when converting them to the U.S. market. For example, Fist of the North Star for Sega's Japanese Mark III became the generic Black Belt for Sega's American Master System back in 1986, making it one of the earliest examples of the practice. There was also Obake no Q Tarou for Famicom (Chubby Cherub for NES) and Nintendo's own U.S. edition of Super Mario Bros. 2, which began life as a vehicle for some Fuji TV mascots.

Reverse that and you have games suddenly finding life as adventures for characters the software's creators may never have heard of. Sure, it wasn't too much of a stretch for Roger Rabbit for Famicom Disk System to become The Bugs Bunny Crazy Castle on NES and Game Boy, but it's a safe bet the creators of Kamen no Ninja Hanamaru had no idea who the Noid was when their game was facelifted to become Yo Noid! But Capcom evidently grabbed the Noid license from Domino's pizza, and rather than create a new platformer for the ill-fated mascot simply gutted one of its own creations. A much cheaper and more economical approach all around.

What does this have to do with Battleship, you might ask? Well, Mindscape's Battleship didn't see release in the U.S. for more than three years after its Japanese debut. A debut that, incidentally, made no reference whatsoever to the popular board game Battleship. Under the aegis of minor Japanese publisher Use Corp., Battleship was originally called Kaisen Game: Navy Blue. And while it resembled Battleship in some rather obvious and overt ways, it wasn't specifically tied to Milton Bradley's classic tabletop game.

In other words, the origin story for Battleship most likely goes something like this: Use Corp. (and developer Pack-in Video) realized that the Link Cable function of the Game Boy would translate perfectly to the mechanics of Battleship. After all, the tabletop game was identical in spirit to the head-to-head two-system multiplayer mechanics enabled by two linked autonomous consoles. The analog game pitted two players face-to-face, calling blind shots against their opponent's tactical grid, which was obscured by a top screen that doubled as a target tracker.

And while the resulting game plays identically to Battleship in the broad strokes, by no means does that make it a ripoff. Like a lot of classic board games (including The Monopoly Game), Battleship simply pulled together a popular non-commercial game that had circulated globally for decades, codified the rules, and turned it into a boxed commodity. Navy Blue may have used Battleship as its jumping-off point, but it incorporates elements that existed outside of and before Milton Bradley's product.

So, yes, players take turns calling shots against the enemy's grid. Yes, each player commands a fleet of differently sized ships, each of which takes up a varying number of grid spaces depending on its size. Hit every sector of a ship and it sinks; the first player to down all of their opponent's ships wins.

Where Navy Blue/Battleship differs is in its specifics and versatility. As befits the automated nature of a CPU-controlled setup, this version of Battleship grants players a variety of offensive options that would be difficult to pull off in real life. Each ship type

wields a specific array of special capabilities, from the radar grid of the submarine (a one-unit vessel that doesn't exist in the board game and can be absolutely infuriating to track down once you've used up your area attacks) to massive multi-hit tactical warheads that cover a huge swath of ocean. There's value in knowing how and when to make use of your special attacks — some work better near the beginning of a battle while others play better later on, but that has to be balanced against the fact that a single lucky strike by your opponent could rob you of that ability altogether.

Given the similarities between Navy Blue and classic Battleship, chances are pretty good that Use never intended their game to be licensed. When Mindscape picked up the Battleship license a few years later, though, this oddly Battleship-like game sitting in obscurity over in Japan lent itself nicely to conversion. Pack-in simply needed to make some revisions — adjusting the flow and difficulty of the game, since there was very little text to localize — in order to make it work to Use's specs. They also whipped up Game Gear version to go with the Game Boy release.

Interestingly enough, Pack-in and Use created a sequel to Navy Blue long before the U.S. release of Battleship: Navy Blue '90. However, Mindscape chose to go with the older game, presumably because the sequel was denser and more complex… meaning it was therefore less faithful to Battleship itself.

Unsurprisingly, Battleship plays best in two-player mode. The CPU has an uncanny ability to hit your ships with its "blind" attacks, a skill matched only by its mysterious tendency not to be where you launch your own strikes. Which isn't to say you can't win against the computer, just that the odds are cheerfully stacked against you.

Regardless of the intent or inspiration behind Navy Blue, it made for a convenient ready-made release when Mindscape came a-knockin' a few years later. Not a bad stroke of luck for Use… or for gamers, who were treated to a pretty respectable adaptation of a board game classic.

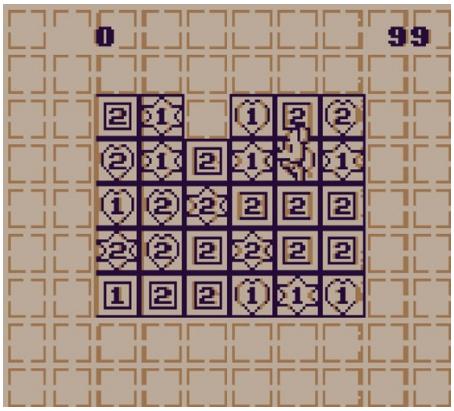
Q Billion

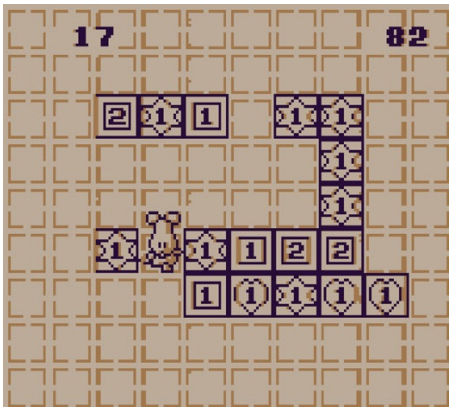
Japanese title: *Q Billion* • キュービィオン

Developer: Seta Corporation

Publisher: Seta Corporation

Release date: 12.22.1989 [JP]





Nobody loves Seta.

In the annals of gaming history, Seta is one of those easily-forgotten little guys. They never published a timeless classic, but neither do any of their games sit perched on some

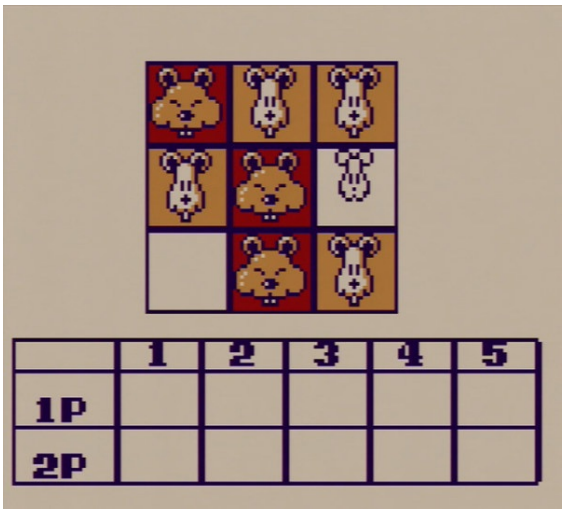
Internet critic's snarky "worst games ever" list. Their most infamous creation, Bio Force Ape, earned its reputation for nearly never existing. Seta published dozens of workmanlike titles through the 8-, 16-, and 32-bit eras before quietly disappearing at the end of the PlayStation 2's lifetime. Seta primarily served the Japanese market, churning out a steady stream of mahjong and pachinko, along with fishing titles, golf, and other of the usual low-interest releases that choke Japanese retailer shelves the way American sports and licensed cartoon titles do here.

So it's little wonder, then, that few remember the company's first Game Boy release, despite the fact that it numbers among the minority of Seta creations to have seen an international release: Q Billion.

And, you know, it's fair. Q Billion is fairly forgettable. It plays like a combination of two previous Game Boy puzzle releases, Boxxle and Shanghai — you're pushing blocks around, dealing with variances in height… I suppose there's a bit of Tetris here, too, since four blocks of like type vanish when placed into adjacent squares.

If Q Billion is notable for anything, I suppose, it's probably the fact that it was the first of many, many nondescript puzzle games to come for Nintendo. Previous puzzlers on the system have been firsts of their kind, often with a considerable legacy behind them. Not so Q Billion; it has no direct predecessors that I can determine, and it doesn't really do anything particularly new or notable. It's a jumble of other people's ideas. And it's not bad — it's just kind of there, lacking the addictive quality of Tetris or the obvious love and effort that made Kwirk so fantastic.

None of this really explains what Q Billion is about, which is basically a matchfour puzzler combined with Soukoban and a hint of three dimensionality. I assume the title is meant to play on the concept of the third dimension — spoken aloud, it sounds like "Cube Billion" — though thankfully the design doesn't take the Z-axis too far. Basically, your little mouse protagonist can push blocks in any of the cardinal directions, provided the target space is empty. Often, you'll find blocks stacked atop one another, and as in Shanghai this creates a tiered effect. Basically, you can only push a block that sits on the level you're currently standing, and the little mouse guy can only jump up a single level.



Much of Q Billion's strategy comes down to maximizing your use of stacked blocks, knowing when to push them around their current level in order to reach other elevated blocks and when to shove them to a lower level. After the initial tutorial stage, blocks begin to bear symbolic marks that have to be matched in order to clear them away — four adjacent hearts will vanish, for example, provided they connect along any edge in any configuration.

Interestingly, only four blocks will vanish at any given time. So Q Billion doesn't play like a Columns or Bejeweled style puzzler, in which connecting more than the minimum number of blocks results in huge bonuses. Instead, this becomes part of the challenge: When more than four blocks of the same type connect, you're given

the power to select which ones will vanish. Choosing the correct blocks to remove plays an important role in completing a stage — pick the wrong ones and the level may become impossible to complete as a result.

Well, “impossible” isn’t really the right word. Q Billion features a very helpful undo ability in the free mode (Game B), allowing you to step back and approach a puzzle in a different way if you bungle a choice. The free mode is presented as a competition based in part on time, so the penalty for this sort of screw-up and redo mainly comes in the form of a loss of time.

The game’s main mode (Game A) is its real meat, a series of pre-designed challenges rather than the random pile of tiles that you have to organize in the free mode. The difficulty on the main mode ramps up frightfully fast, though, with the puzzles going from “hand-holding tutorial” to “how the hell do I do this” in about five levels. It’s challenging, sure, but it lacks the compelling hook a Kwirk or even a Shanghai; there’s no real satisfaction in solving Q Billion’s puzzles. Even the competitive mode isn’t all that it could be, framed by a drawn-out tic-tac-toe battle that takes too long to resolve for its own good.

Between its unremarkable design, its unbelievably ugly box art, and the fact that its name is barely legible — the font Seta chose for the U.S. release reads more like “4 Billion” — Q Billion is neither a lost or forgotten classic… it’s simply forgotten. A mildly amusing diversion at best and hardly worth tracking down considering how many better puzzlers the Game Boy would see throughout its lifetime.

Nobody loves Seta, and nobody loves Q Billion. That’s just how it goes, sometimes.

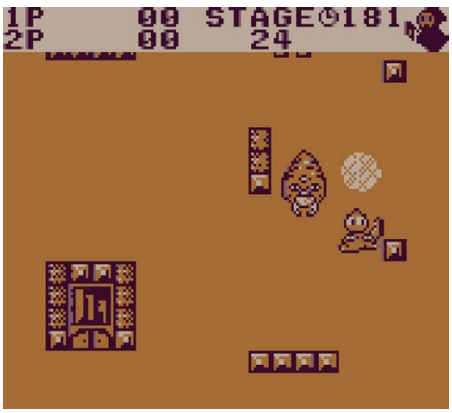
Boomer's Adventure in Asmik World

Japanese title: *Teke! Teke! Asmik-kun World* • てけ! てけ! アスミッくん ワールド

Developer: Dual

Publisher: Asmik

Release date: 12.27.1989 [JP] | 4.1990 [US]



The vexing thing about Boomer's Adventure in Asmik World is that, while it's a perfectly entertaining action puzzler in its own right, it's best described in terms of a game that wouldn't hit the Game Boy until several months later. Much like the way some think Shin

Megami Tensei is a big ripoff of Pokémon. Boomer's Adventure might seem the victim of a massive ripoff when Meldac released the startlingly similar Heiankyo Alien several months after Boomer's debut… but that's not really true at all.

While Heiankyo Alien didn't make its way to Game Boy until 1990, the PC original dates back to 1979, making it downright venerable by the time Asmik cheerfully borrowed its fundamental design for this adventure, featuring an odd little eponymous mascot (Boomer went by the name "Asmikkun" in Japan). Boomer owes his existence to Heiankyo Alien, not the other way around.

This is all very inconvenient, because Boomer's Adventure would be much simpler to explain if we'd already covered its inspiration. The two games have much in common, though Asmik's creation — benefitting from a decade of game design advancement as it did — is by far the more complex of the pair. While both titles revolve around the concept of trapping enemies by digging pits (yes, like a top-down perspective on Hyper Lode Runner), that's about as far as Heiankyo takes it. Boomer's Adventure, on the other hand, plays more like a game released postPac-Man, featuring power-ups, collectibles, and enemy A.I. that doesn't simply putter around aimlessly.

Here you control a small dinosaur named Boomer who must descend to the bottom of a dungeon, then return, Nethack-like, to the surface through more difficult renditions of those previously conquered arenas. The difficulty here boils down to the fact that some scoundrel has cruelly locked off all the doors between levels, meaning progression requires locating the hidden key to each door.

Boomer's main form of action consists of digging out pits into the ground. As in Heiankyo Alien, digging holds the key to defeating foes; every hole you create in the ground remains there until the end of the stage (or until you die), and monsters can easily wander into one. Boomer can also fall into his own pits, and just like his opponents doing so will cause him to become stuck momentarily, vulnerable to enemy attack. On the other hand, trapping a foe gives you an advantage, allowing you to fill in the hole over its head, destroying it momentarily.

However, digging proves all the more important thanks to the fact that it does more than simply create traps in which to snare the enemy. Digging also unearths essential treasures — treasures such as the keys to the next stage. The key you need in order to escape each stage sits beneath the sand in a non-random location, and you need to figure out exactly where it's hidden in order to claim it and move along. This isn't entirely a blind challenge; you can find tools (often sitting in plain sight rather than buried) that will help you pinpoint the current level's key. A compass will allow you to triangulate its location, while the metal detector will chirp madly when you walk atop the key's location. Other items include special shoes to allow you to speed up for the remainder of the current stage, projectiles to toss at enemies for an instant kill, and more.

Further adding to the complexity of the affair is the fact that enemies are a lot smarter than you might expect. You'll sense a hint of this right away, as the little crustacean who walk around on the first stage may blunder foolishly into your pitfalls, but they'll duck to safety if you try and take them out with a projectile. Foes are capable of more advanced behaviors, too, the trickiest of which is definitely the ability to dig just like Boomer.

Not only can they create holes, they can also cover over the holes you make. If you don’t dig a hole completely, for example, a wandering foe will pause momentarily and cover it over before moving along. And if a creature happens to dig up an item, including the level key, it’ll secrete that object on its person and keep it hidden away until you destroy the creature in question. Later stages tend to be a mad rush to the key before enemies can get there… though you can also use this to your advantage when you first arrive in a new level and don’t know the location of the hidden objects, allowing greedy monsters to unearth them for you.

All in all, it works pretty well: The mazes tend to be fairly compact, randomness is limited to enemy behaviors rather than object placement, and a fairly generous password system allows you to earn steady progress through the dungeons. Boomer’s Adventure’s only major sticking point comes in its boss battles, which feel almost like they’re from a different game entirely. Bosses tend to be huge, fast, and dangerous; this sits at odds with the rest of Boomer’s Adventure, which plays out slowly and methodically. These encounters can be immediately overwhelming and demand both patience and sharp reflexes. The battles toward the end of the game are particularly frustrating, since passwords are harder to come by and therefore their unbalanced difficulty (particularly that of the last boss) can result in quick losses followed by tiresome replays of several stages to earn another shot at the boss in question.

Despite this one huge sticking point, Boomer’s Adventure can be pretty fun. If nothing else, it’s an admirable evolution of a classic PC game. Nowhere near as influential as the game that inspired it, of course; how often do you hear people gush about Boomer’s Adventure in Asmik World? But it’s nevertheless a fun, if forgotten, spin on an old-school concept well-suited to the Game Boy platform.

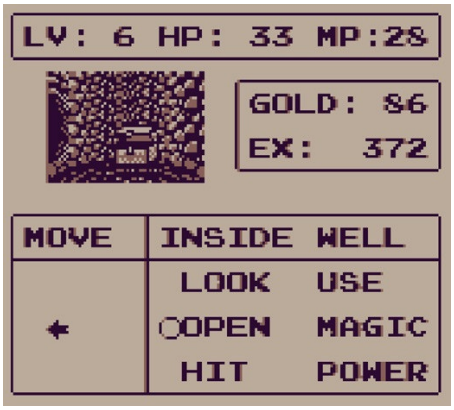
The Sword of Hope

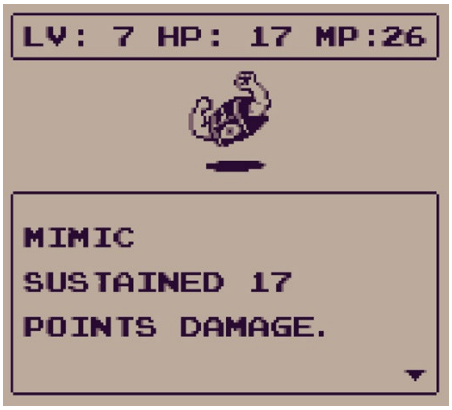
Japanese Title: セレクション 選ばれし者 • Selection: Erabareshi Mono

Developer: Kemco

Publisher: Kemco Seika

Release date: Dec. 28, 1989 [JP] June 1991 [US] 1991 [EU]





The second RPG ever released for Game Boy was even more unconventional than The Final Fantasy Legend. Square's game at least adhered to the general structure and format of the console RPG in the post-Dragon Quest era, even if its inner workings were all over

the place. But Kemco's The Sword of Hope — you have to love all the definitive articles old-school RPGs used! — borrowed its share of RPG trappings, but crammed them into a shell that resembled nothing so much as Icom's MacVenture graphical adventures: Shadowgate, Deja Vu, and Uninvited.

Which of course makes sense; Kemco Seika had converted those PC classics to Mac, and generally did a bang-up job of it. The ethics of swiping the form of someone else's creations for semi-derivative works could probably spark some heated debate among intellectual property lawyers, but that sort of thing was fairly common in the '80s. Using Shadowgate as a springboard for a hybrid RPG/adventure certainly seems a lot less shady than, say, Midway creating multiple unauthorized Pac-Man games on the strength of owning arcade distribution rights for the franchise. And Sword of Hope is certainly a much more entertaining game than, say, New Exciting Pac-Man Plus — even if it does feel undeniably dated in the year 2015.

Sword of Hope walks an unusual tightrope between genres, one part classic role-playing game and one part graphical adventure. It's a hybrid format that's rarely been explored; arguably its closest relative would be Sting's Riviera: The Promised Land, or (more contemporaneously) Falcom's Tombs & Treasures. Players get about the game world in the fashion of an adventure game, traveling from screen to screen — node to node — but the must deal with random combat encounters along the way that result in Dragon Quest-style one-on-one turn-based combat.

Neither element of The Sword of Hope is exactly top-of-class for its time. When I say the role-playing combat is reminiscent of Dragon Quest, I mean the original Dragon Quest: You command a single protagonist who faces off against a tiny handful of enemies at a time, with only the most rudimentary combat commands at your fingertips: Attack, Fight, Use (items), Run. Your spell repertoire is gated by your level, your weapon and armor options are tightly constrained, and progress comes in dribs and drabs as you complete the various minor tasks as dictated by the story.

Logistically, everything except the combat plays like a simplified version of a graphical adventure game. The Sword of Hope takes its cues from the likes of Shadowgate, though it really does feel like Kemco's designers looked at the Icom games they'd been porting and said, "Man, these just aren't right." In many ways, The Sword of Hope feels like a very Japanese take on Icom's adventures, which is to say much fairer and less arbitrary. Where the MacVenture titles tended to inflict cheap, instant, untelegraphed death upon players for daring to explore the game world — you know, pretty much the point of an adventure game — The Sword of Hope feels much less punishing. There's less to interact with in the game world, but what you can interact with will rarely kill you outright… and when you do stumble into a trap, it usually takes the form of a battle from which you have even odds of running from safely.

So where Shadowgate would murder you in an instant for daring to go up against a cave troll with the wrong weapon or kill you outright for breaking a mirror, The Sword of Hope instead will take these "traps" as an opportunity to throw you into battle. Maybe you can't beat the Treant the first time you fight it, but you can probably flee to safety after it pounds you for a massive fraction of your total health in the first round of combat. That treasure chest may be a trap, but you can potentially defeat that Mimic with the proper

spell.

It’s hard to say that The Sword of Hope offers a huge improvement over its inspirations. It simply shifts around their strengths and weaknesses. The game can be awfully grindy; the mini-map that depicts the area around your current node is only somewhat helpful in tracking foes. As in a roguelike, they get to take an action when you either move or complete a round of combat, and if a fight goes on too long new creatures may wander in and join the fray — not unlike the FOEs of Etrian Odyssey, in fact. This can cause combat to drag severely, which isn’t helped by the fact that the random encounter rate is much higher than the mini-map would suggest. Even more annoyingly, damage values in combat are all over the place; while creatures have weaknesses to specific attacks, both player attacks and and enemy actions tend to hit for wildly unpredictable amounts — the same enemy might hit the hero for trifling damage one round and take down most of his HP in the next, and the reverse holds true for the player’s spells and sword attacks.

Despite these annoyances (along with the lack of The Final Fantasy Legend’s save-anywhere feature, forcing players to return to the outset of the adventure to collect a password at the end of a session), The Sword of Hope still manages to be fairly entertaining. Falling in combat amounts to an inconvenience, not a setback, and the lightweight adventure game structure keeps things much more focused than your typical 8-bit RPG.

While the ethics of the game’s design could be viewed as somewhat shady, given the way Kemco clearly pilfered so much of this adventure from games they had licensed from another developer, the end result is one of the more creative and substantial works of the Game Boy’s first year of life. It falls short of classic status, sure, but it’s a more ambitious attempt at hybrid game design than you might expect from a portable title of this vintage. Inessential, but interesting.

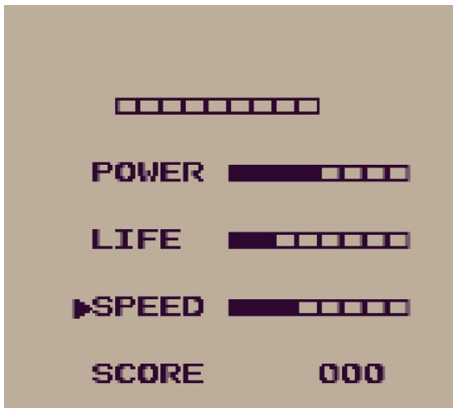
Master Karateka

Japanese title: *Master Karateka* • マスターカラテカ

Developer: TOSE

Publisher: Asmik

Release date: 12.27.1989 [JP] | 4.1990 [US]



The final Game Boy release for 1989 was also, fittingly, one of the final games released in the 1980s. In many ways, it makes for a neat summary of how games had changed over the course of the decade.

Master Karateka offered gamers a conversion of a classic, American-developed 1984 PC action game to Nintendo's Japanese handheld system. Jordan Mechner's Karateka had

been one of the first wave of great post-games-crash PC creations, a game that might well have debuted on a console had that market not imploded; it was much faster-paced and far simpler in structure than your typical PC game of the era, but there was no Atari 2600 or ColecoVision left to host it. And so Mechner designed it for Apple II. By 1989, more than five years later, Nintendo had revitalized the console market in the U.S., dominating it utterly, and had recently sought to expand its empire by launching a portable companion to its NES – where, eventually, Karateka ended up under the name "Master Karateka."

Of course, this wasn't the first console port of Karateka. And, strangely enough, it didn't come to the U.S., remaining strictly a Japanese release. So there's no great cosmic portent at work here; it's simply a touch of synchronicity. Master Karateka also speaks to the state of games in 1989 in a different way: Here was a portable conversion of a 1989 PC game, and the results were barely adequate. Meanwhile, Mechner's long-awaited follow-up, Prince of Persia, had just debuted on Apple II, and it utterly shamed Karateka. While the humble Game Boy strained to reproduce a PC game from five years prior, the PC market itself was humming along at the cutting edge of design tech.

In all fairness, some of Master Karateka's inadequacy can be pinned on the source material. Sure, Karateka had featured some breathtaking character animation when it debuted in 1984, it ultimately featured incredibly shallow play mechanics — a sort of prototype belt scroller, but far less entertaining than the likes of Double Dragon or Final Fight. Players controlled a lone karate master in his quest to invade a castle belonging to an evil warlord named Akuma, who sent his henchmen one by one to face off against the karateka in mortal combat. At stake, of course, is the love or freedom or virtue or whatever of an abducted princess (who, disappointingly, loses her ability to kill the player's character in a single hit in this version — truly a helpless damsel).

There's little in the way of depth to Master Karateka's gameplay; your champion walks left to rights, changes into and out his combat posture when enemies appear, and can perform high, low, and medium punches and kicks. That's the extent of it, and aside from a handful of traps (like the guaranteed cheap instant kill of the castle's portcullis) there's nothing more to the game than beating up a succession of dudes. The platforming mechanics and trap-evasion that would take root in Prince of Persia are practically nowhere to be found in its predecessor.

Developer TOSE, they of the infamous ghost-written versions of games, did at least try to add a touch of depth to Master Karateka. At the beginning of the game, players are allowed to assign skill points to the protagonist, customizing his strength, speed, and health. This results in a tricky trade-off — your needs as a combatant change over the course of the game, and while it might be tempting to bulk up on power to take out tough enemies more quickly, without sufficient speed you'll never get a hit in against some of the more difficult foes, and too low a health rating means a top-tier enemy can easily take you out in a single hit. Unfortunately, due to the overall limitations of the game design, the point allocation system doesn't feel like it lends any real depth to the action — it's more akin to being hamstrung by default.

Honestly, it's easy to see why Master Karateka remained stranded in Japan. The game feels horribly dated and clunky, and while its slick animation still looked great on Game Boy, the limited mechanics, shallow content, and overly difficult design don't make for a

terribly fun experience. About all it has going for it on this new platform is that a full playthrough lasts maybe 15 minutes, making for a perfect Game Boy fit… assuming you can make it that far, of course. While it's interesting to see yet another PC conversion to Game Boy, and one so different from the rest, Master Karateka doesn't have much going for it. It's a bit of a letdown at the end of an otherwise strong first year for the system's life.

Japan Releases April–Dec 1989

Alleyway

Baseball

Super Mario Land

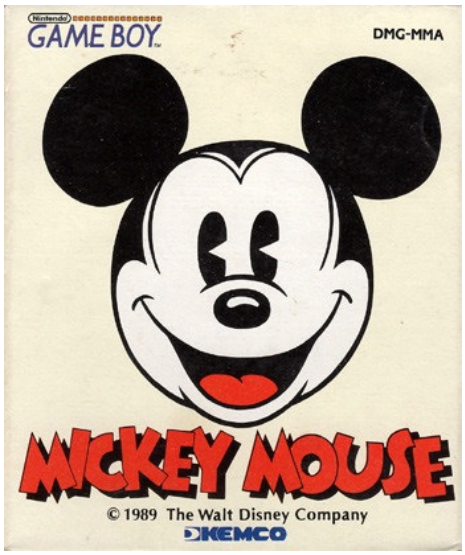
Yakuman

Tennis

Alleyway

Shanghai

Soukoban



Mickey Mouse

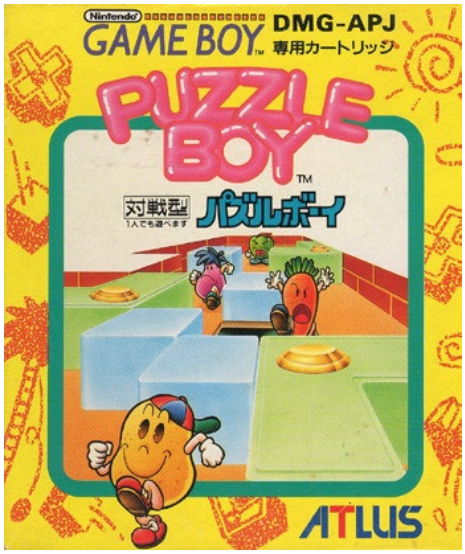
Motocross Maniacs

Hyper Lode Runner

66 Piki no Wani Daisakusen

Dracula Densetsu

Seaside Volley



Puzzle Boy

Golf

Pachinko Time

Makaitoshi Sa•Ga

Shogi

Hokuto no Ken

Kaisen Game: Navy Blue

Q Billion

Asmik-kun World

Selection

U.S. Releases Aug.–Dec. 1989

Altogether, Japanese Game Boy owners had the opportunity to buy 25 different releases through the end of 1989. In the U.S., however, only six titles were known to have been released. All but four of Japan's 1989 releases eventually made their way to America, but the majority of them came over in 1990. Five of these releases came from Nintendo: Alleyway, Baseball, Super Mario Land, Tennis, and Tetris, accounting for all but two of the company's Japanese releases (Golf would head overseas early in 1990, and Yakuman wouldn't come over at all). Castlevania: The Adventure would be the sole third-party Game Boy release to launch in the U.S. in 1989, likely a testament to the popularity of the series among Nintendo fans… and, likely, also the low localization requirements involved in such a simple action game. The disparity in releases between the two territories probably came largely from Game Boy's four-month headstart in Japan, as well as the fact that the Japanese Famicom market had already begun to weaken compared to the U.S. NES market, which was hitting its peak in 1989. Nintendo didn't publish as many Game Boy games in the U.S. in 1989 because they didn't need to.

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