ISSUE 02
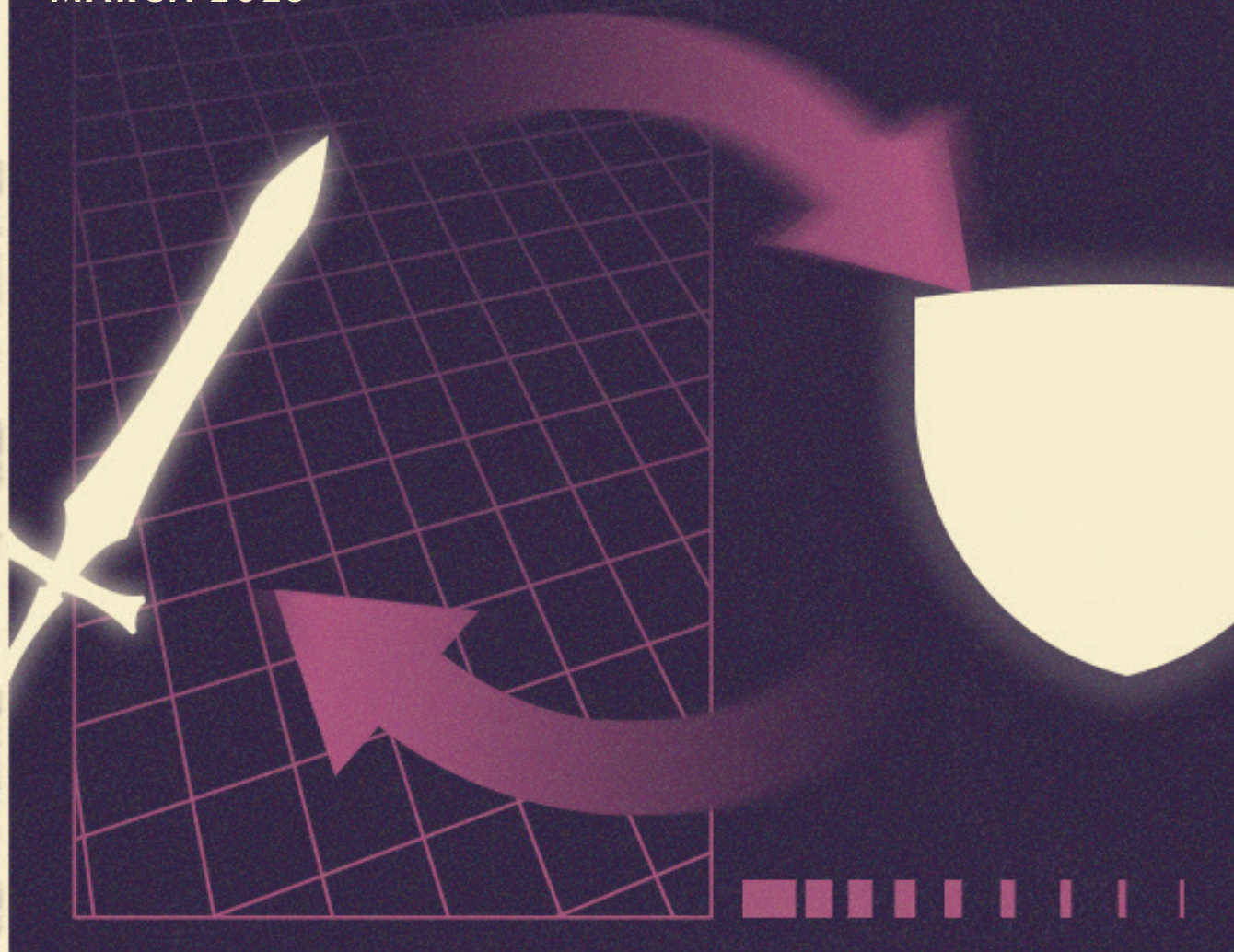
MARCH 2023

In This Issue

Turn-based Treasures

Pathologic HD Classic

Genshin Impact

& More!

Demo disc not included

STORIES FOR GAMERS
BEHIND THE TIMES
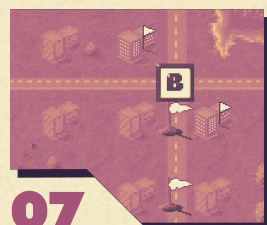
In this issue.

Welcome to the second issue of *The Patient Press*, and welcome to 2023! This zine is the collaborative effort of members from the Patient Gamers discord, an off-shoot community from the subreddit of the same name. Patient gamers (the good ones, anyway) wait at least one year from a game's release to purchase it, whether that be for reasons like waiting for a good sale, avoiding the initial hype of a new release, waiting for bug fixes, or for the simple fact that they have an ever-growing list of games already queued up in their backlog.

This issue's theme is **Turn-based Treasures**, so we're bringing you everything from *XCOM* to *Pokémon* to obscure abandonware titles you've probably never heard of.

If turn-based games aren't your thing, don't fret. We also have a cautionary tale about the dangers and delights of *Genshin Impact*, the significance of player agency in *Pathologic HD Classic*, and a *Street Fighter* enthusiast's brush with a laughably bad fighting game from their youth.

We hope you all enjoy!

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ABOVE: LET'S PLAY ARCHIVE
RIGHT: REDDIT

(FIRE EMBLEM: THE BLAZING BLADE)
GENRE: TACTICAL RPG
DEV: INTELLIGENT SYSTEMS
RELEASE: 2003

Tactical RPGs: A Genre Beyond Final Fantasy Tactics

BY
CORENCE

We're in the middle of a tactical RPG renaissance with plenty of great grid-based games to enjoy (that, of course, we're all waiting patiently for). Almost invariably, tactical games get compared to *Final Fantasy Tactics (FFT)*. It is many people's first, and sometimes only, exposure to the genre, and it is often considered the best tactical RPG of all time. It is the measuring stick every new game has to go up against. However, there is plenty of variety in the genre and many grid-based games play quite differently. Here's some of what I look at to understand how a game fits into the tactical RPG space.

I find the most impactful design decision of tactical combat is the turn structure, and the first big splitting point for turn structure is unit-based or team-based turns. Unit-based turns have some sort of speed-based or initiative system that decide the order units move (e.g. *FFT*), while team-based turns let you move your entire force in whatever order you want (e.g. *Fire Emblem*). This significantly changes the scope of decision-making on each turn.

Unit-based turns are more bite-sized and can be made more quickly, and fights feel more like a skirmish as units from both sides fire attacks at each other. Team-based turns can involve lengthy planning and you can often kill multiple enemy units with coordinated efforts. *Disgaea*'s puzzles involving lifting and throwing your units would be very tedious if you couldn't control the order your units took actions easily.

Another factor is the amount one character can do on a turn. Many tactical RPGs have some variant of a "Move-Act-Wait" turn structure, where you pick a square to move to, perform a single action, and end your turn. Others get more involved with action point systems, like *XCOM* or *Divinity: Original Sin*. Action points help balance the action economy of different actions—utility spells can be hard to justify in a single-action-per-turn system—but it makes turns take longer and affects pacing.

There's also the level of customization you have over your characters. *Fell Seal*'s *FFT*-inspired job system lets you explore different combinations of skills and find synergistic combos, while *Shining Force II* gives you fixed characters with fixed abilities. *Troubleshooter: Abandoned Children* uses a small cast of characters but gives enormous depth with its extensive mastery board that lets you craft a build from a combination of unique passives.

Of course, there's plenty outside of the battlefield that can affect how a game's combat feels.

Permadeath or external time pressure in games like *XCOM* or *Battle Brothers* can change how you assess risk within a fight, while games without permadeath or more generous undo mechanics can have more punishing surprises.

These different dichotomies inform one another. A game that has complex characters with many abilities is more likely to have unit-based turns, since managing your entire team at once would be overwhelming and too powerful. Early *Fire Emblem*'s simple "Move + Attack" is a good choice for managing its larger army turns. Games with larger army sizes can have less individual character customization since you can make up for it by customizing the composition of your army.

Of course, none of these design choices are inherently better than the other and a lot of it is up to taste. So try out a few tactical games, try to understand what makes their combat tick, and learn what you like!

(FINAL FANTASY TACTICS)
GENRE: TACTICAL RPG
DEV: SQUARE
RELEASE: 1997

LEFT: THE ALMIGHTY BACKLOG (POKÉMON RUBY)
ABOVE: PUSH SQUARE (PERSONA 3)

Despite everything, it's still you

BY
ELLIE_

When RPGs reflect the self

It's 2003, and the young me is playing *Pokémon Ruby* for the first time. I can still recall my mind swirling amidst the heady rush of starting a new *Pokémon* generation; it's an experience always associated with joy and discovery, but for one brief moment it achieved something that I've never quite let go of: when *Pokémon* made me cry. It was such an innocuous thing; in an early town you come across a still, shimmering pool, waters gently lapping at the bank in the glimmering sun. A path drives you by it, guiding you silently to the edges, and for the first time you can stand by the water and a reflection stares back at you. It came at a delicate point in my life: the first stirrings of dysphoria were rearing its vicious head, a monster which gnawed at my mind. Seeing a reflection and understanding it was wrong was a sensation I was learning to feel and fear.

Persona 3 also uses mirrors to invite its players to re-examine themselves. During an event, players find themselves locked in an Escher-esque hotel filled with mirrors and it's only by breaking those which show no reflection that you can progress, until finally you open a yawning portal to a monster which reflects one of your party's inner psyche. It's obviously all symbolic, but this act of shattering mirrors, of refusing to look deeper lest you find that gaping bleak void cut out within you is an experience I think all non-cis folk can probably relate to. Of course, it ends by overcoming the savage creature that lurks behind it, and if only it was as easy in real life as it is in a game. The experience of wrestling with the AI-controlled characters of your party certainly feels like trying to wrangle together one's emotions into a cohesive unit in order to overcome the trials our own brain's force on ourselves.

It's *Undertale* which we turn to today to close this series of self-reflection off and gives us perhaps the most important lesson to take away. A mirror in the starting Ruins area chirps a cute two word response at us when looked in—"it's you!"—but it's the same mirror during the endgame that really gives us the most poignant reminder: "despite everything, it's still you." Just as that first reflection in Ruby matched my real-life experience of hating and being scared of the face I saw in the mirror, so too does this affirmation of self echo my mental state two decades later. While there's still a long road ahead, finally I can look upon a face that bears the marks of self-hatred but also the all-important understanding of care and self-love. I can still see the person I was afraid of behind it all, but it no longer holds the power over me that it once claimed; instead it's a part of a greater whole, one that physically looks more like the image of myself I hold in my mind, but also one which carries itself with the levity and lightness of self-acceptance. Despite everything that has come at me, I am still me_

IMAGE CREDIT: PLAYSTATION EUROPE

IMAGE CREDIT: EPIC GAMES

Many Days with Metal Knights

BY

POSSESSEDCOW

GENRE: STRATEGY
DEV: KNIGHTSOFT TECHNOLOGIES INC.
RELEASE: 1995

If you played games when you were young, you probably have a game that you played the hell out of that seemingly no one else has heard of. Then, with the Internet, you find out that there are scores of people who played *Brave Fencer Musashi* or *Little Nemo*, and you can share your memories with them.

Metal Knights is an interesting paradox: I've never met another person on the Internet who has played or even heard of *Metal Knights*, but the servers are still up, the website is still up, and it gets occasional posts on its time machine of a website. It even got an Android port some years back.

So, let me tell you a bit about my experience with *Metal Knights*. It was a rarity back then—the whole game was completely free, with only a couple limits holding you back. For one, you were limited on the amount of concurrent games you could join. Four, I believe, which you could raise to eight by registering the game (paying them money). As it was a turn-based game, games would take a while, as the turn timer was 8–72 hours.

The other limitation? Your unlocked technology tree would reset every turn, making it hard to get higher technology without cash reserves. In retrospect, free players were at a huge disadvantage. But it was 1998 or so, I was nine, and free full games were unheard of. I'm not sure how many people paid for registration, but I imagine most of the defeats I suffered were more because of my age than my technological disadvantage.

Metal Knights was, in some ways, ahead of its time. It had a primitive skill ranking system, where beating stronger players would increase your rank more than weaker ones, and losing to weaker players would lower your rank more than losing to stronger ones. Standard stuff now. It was this that led to, quite possibly, my most shameful gaming moment.

Metal Knights has alliances, which are essentially guilds. The alliance I somehow joined—the memories are hazy—would have practice matches. In *Metal Knights*, there was some mechanism for everyone to yield a match. If everyone yielded, the game would be considered a draw and no one's rank would be altered. The alliance used that frequently for practice matches.

However, if one person came in at the end and didn't yield, they'd be marked as the winner. As a nine-year-old, and a Recruit, the second-lowest rank in *MK*'s parlance, the temptation was too much for me to resist. I didn't yield and gained points for defeating all of my alliance-mates. The

points I got from my ill-earned victory ranked me up to a Soldier, but I immediately regretted my actions. I never signed into that account again, and instead created a new, untainted account, and was back at Cadet.

Despite the vibrant online scene, my favorite memories of playing *Metal Knights* were those with my friend Michael. We'd take turns at the keyboard as we played out a game locally. We were both of similar skill, and most of our time was spent spreading out over the map rather than engaging in battle. I'm not sure if we even properly finished a game, but it was a fun pastime to go between nerf wars and running around outside.

This was the '90s, so rumors about secrets and hidden unlockables was the norm, and *Metal Knights* had its own secret: the porcupine star. This fabled configuration is actually listed in the FAQ, but the only hint that it gives you is that it uses 4–6 porcupines—a defensive unit.

Unlike the Mew underneath the truck by the S.S. Anne, the porcupine star is very real, and it will make your base completely invisible, even to radar. Now, did this configuration end up being very helpful? No, but it was a fun secret for a kid to have. I don't think I ever told Michael.

Since the only instructions online on the execution is a message in an old usenet group, here's the secret: buy a transport and five porcupines. Use the transport to move four of the porcupines diagonally two units from the base, then have the fifth porcupine move one unit north. There you have it. An invisible base.

I have no idea what led me to stop playing *Metal Knights*. Did Michael and I get tired of it? Did the lingering shame of my betrayal cause me to fall off? Was I just a child with fickle tastes? I'll never know, but it's a game that I often look back fondly upon—an indie that has endured far longer than most AAAs.

What will Krookodile do?

(POKÉMON BLACK/
WHITE 2)
GENRE: JRPG
DEV: GAME FREAK
RELEASE: 2012

Why the Pokémon games are the only good turn-based games ever made
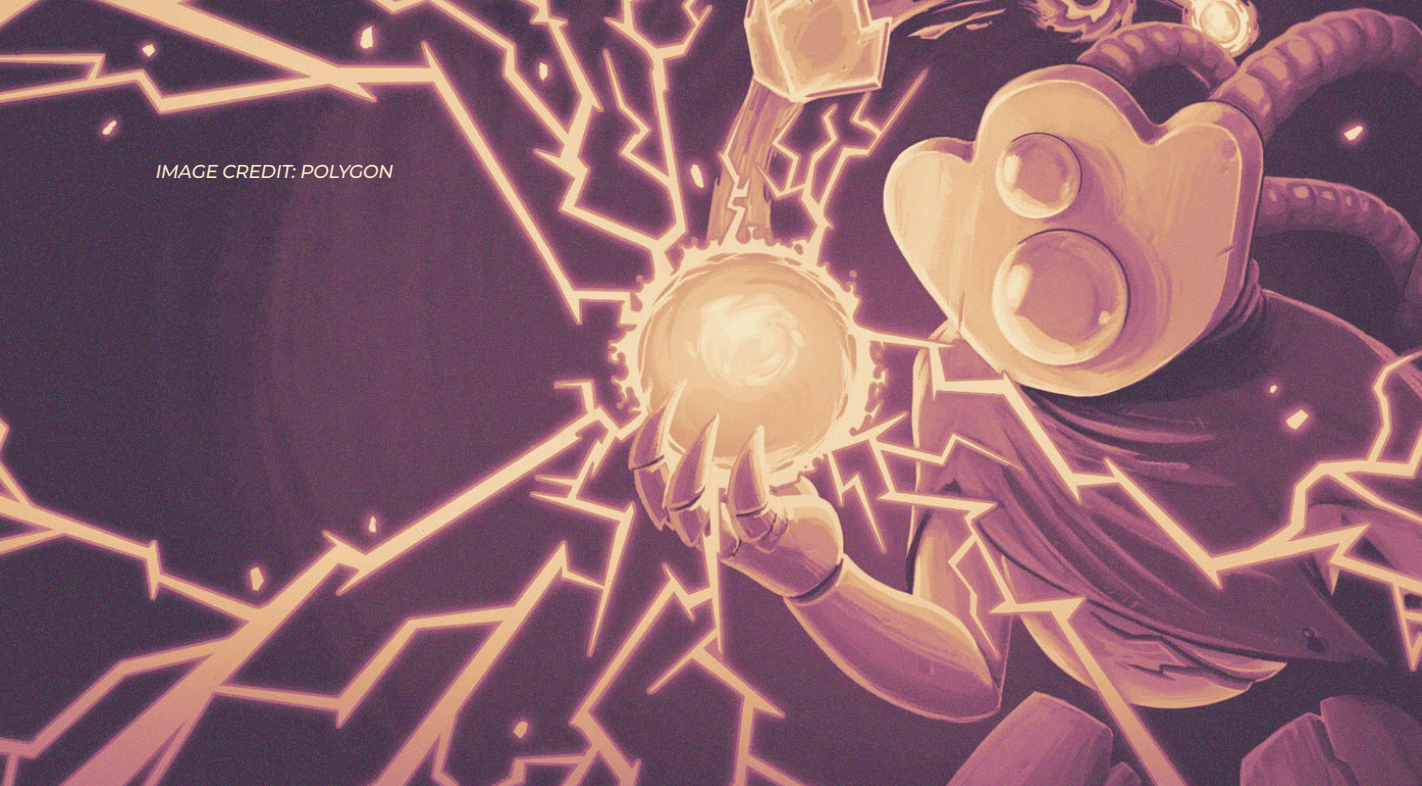
*BY
K-RALZ*

I know that's a spicy headline, but I make it in jest. I'm not a fan of turn-based titles, mostly because I find them boring. Perhaps my only exposure to them are JRPGs that are too long and feature too many other elements that bring the experience down for me. The Pokémon games, on the other hand, are a different story.

While the gaming world is focused (for better or worse) on *Pokémon Scarlet* and *Violet* at the moment, I too have been collecting pocket monsters. For the better part of the year, I've slowly been making my way through *White 2*, the first *Pokémon* game I've played since *Platinum*, about ten years ago. It's fine, but I do have several issues with it. Despite the substantial amount of new Pokémon that the game introduces, I find many of the designs to be tepid and uninspired. The zoomed-in sprite artwork of your own Pokémon during battles is outright horrible, along with the general graphical fidelity of the overworld. Last, there is an overabundance of social and side activities

(some of which are inaccessible now as the Nintendo Wi-Fi Connection service has been shut down) that seem like more of a chore rather than being fun.

Even with all those issues, I can't deny that the game scratches an itch. It doesn't come close to the perfection that was the third generation games, but it still has a great feeling of discovery. I love going in and out of every building in a new town and exploring routes for hidden locations and items. And the feeling of finally running into a Pokémon you've been searching for, followed by the *click* of the Poké Ball when you finally catch it is so satisfying.

Then of course, there's battling; the single thing that has ruined other turn-based games for me. In the *Pokémon* games, I went from tolerating it as a youth, to actually enjoying it (somewhat) as an adult. Arriving in a new city, going to the gym and thinking, "Oh, it's a Poison-type Gym. Hmm, I don't have anything to counter that; let me explore a little and try and find a new Pokémon," is a fun discovery in and of itself. Sure, you could brute force your way through most battles (that's how I played when I was younger) but actually deciphering the rock-paper-scissors dynamic, going through a battle completely unscathed and discovering new Pokémon in the process is a trifecta of fun.

Combat in games like *Golden Sun* and *Chrono Trigger* never clicked with me because I just didn't care about anyone or anything involved in the battle, no thanks to the stale and repetitive enemy designs in each game. On top of that, I'd go into almost every encounter spamming whatever attack did the most damage, because finding out what weakness enemies had was a monotonous chore of cycling through all the attacks of each party member. The strong visual distinction of most Pokémon also helps in figuring out what type they could be, as does the Pokédex once said Pokémon are captured. The huge library of attacks for each type, each with their own unique animations also made me truly feel like my Pokémon were progressing and getting stronger, as opposed to equipping a party member with a new item that simply makes some stats go up.

In addition, the environments give you a good understanding of what types of Pokémon reside there. If I'm in a cave, I know that Ground-type and Rock-type Pokémon are common, so I'll have my Water Pokémon first in my party for some quick combat encounters and easy levelling. That was a pain point for me when playing through *Costume Quest 2* last year; even though they introduced types into that game, combat felt like a chore because I never knew what enemy types I'd encounter, and in the process, the battle would drag on unnecessarily.

I've long since accepted that turn-based games aren't for me. But with the convenience, variety and outright fun of the Pokémon games, I hope that one day I'll discover more turn-based games that incorporate similar elements, as I think it's an easy way to enjoy the genre, while still offering plenty of room for build diversity.

Slay the Spire is Fire

BY

PG

GENRE: ROGUELIKE; DECKBUILDER

DEV: MEGA CRIT GAMES

RELEASE: 2017

Slay the Spire is a turn-based rogue-like card game. You play as one of four characters with the goal of, well, slaying the spire, and escaping from an underground maze of tunnels. Each character has different cards available to them that makes them unique. You also get a character-specific relic, an item that gives you bonuses. As you play, you obtain more cards and relics. Like any rogue-like, you lose most progress when you die, but in *Slay the Spire* you can unlock card and relic availability, which means that in subsequent playthroughs, you can get these usually stronger cards and bonuses, even though it doesn't start in your starting deck.

The overall feel of the game is like playing a board game. Picking a character feels like picking up a character card. Playing cards feels like throwing a card on a board. Picking a route feels like moving your character up the map. Having all the moves as cards also makes it feel this way.

Throughout a run, the player can pick cards that synergize in unique ways with each other or have an entire deck centered around some mechanic, such as poison. It is not formulaic, since it's RNG dependent and you might not get the cards or relics you want. This means that you have to keep a lookout for possible combos and think about what cards and relics to choose or buy. There are also enough synergies and you pick up enough cards that you can almost always find good synergies. In addition, you can buy cards and relics that you need from a shop. This gives you the chance to pick up what you need, if it is available. All of this requires some level of thought when picking up cards and relics and some trial and error to see what works and what doesn't.

An example of a fun combo would be: you have in your hand a card that doubles your next card played and an attack card that returns any card from your discard pile to the top of your deck. You play your double card. Then the attack card is played once, you return the double card to the top of your deck, discard that attack card, and play that attack again, returning the attack card from before to the top of your deck.

The combat requires you to deal damage to enemies by playing the cards you have and using combos you've thought of. Playing massive combos is simply fun, just like when you have a good turn in a board or card game. There is also some depth to the combat itself. In battle, you have to plan your moves, since you have a limited amount of resources. "Should I attack now or apply a buff first?" or "Should I debuff the enemy and take damage or guard but not apply the debuff?" In addition to this, since you can rarely heal on runs, you have to consider your HP not just in this battle, but for subsequent battles as well. This adds an extra layer of depth. The combat may still not be that deep, but it is entertaining enough and that's what is important for a video game.

The only major flaw is that, at least for me, there weren't enough cards to sustain the game until you manage to beat the fourth act. The fourth was far more difficult than the rest of the acts. As such, it requires a lot of skill when deckbuilding to prepare and a lot of retries. Eventually you see and experience the cards enough times that they start to get boring. This is partially solved by the various characters, there being four, but you converge towards one character when you want to beat the final boss and use it repeatedly. Now, adding and balancing cards is a lot of effort, but having some more cards available to each character also wouldn't hurt.

In conclusion, *Slay the Spire* is fire. It's a simple game with not a lot of gimmicky features and in spire (sorry) of this and its few flaws, it's entertaining nonetheless.
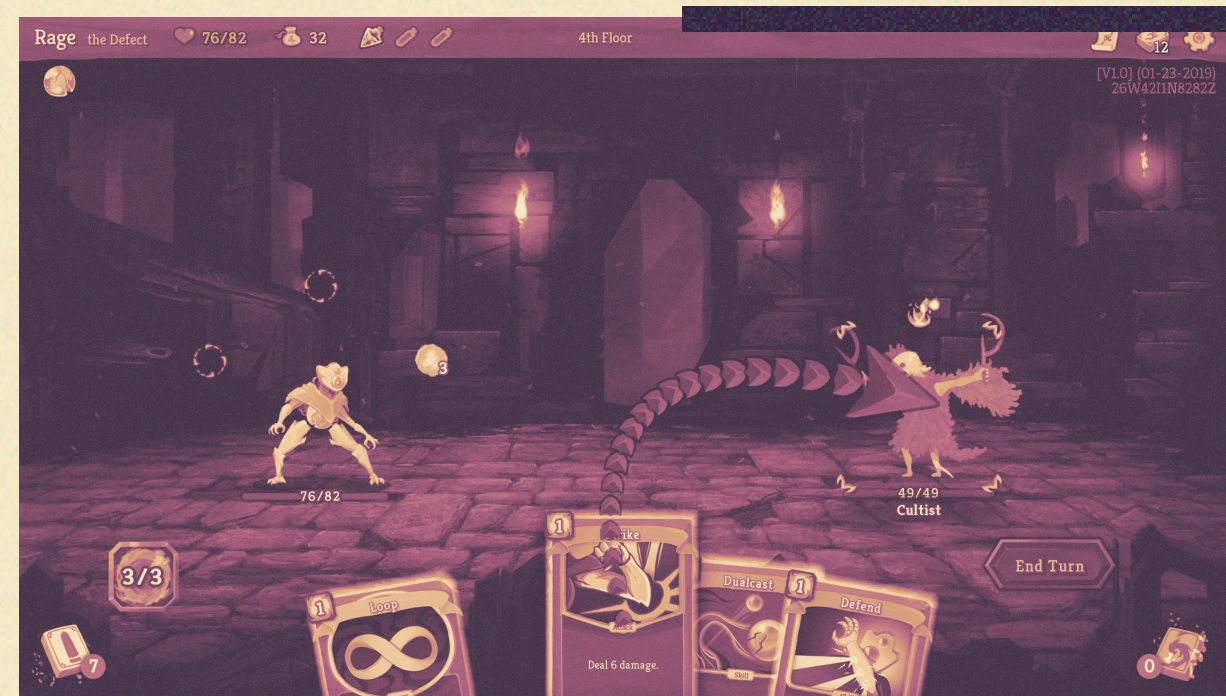
Pathologic HD Classic

When the Player Replaces the Character

BY
DUNNYLORD

Interactive storytelling has been around since the very beginning of humanity. To this day, being able to add your own part to a story, even in a predefined setting, is an enjoyable experience and can make you feel connected to a story more than if you were just a passive listener. Video games turned interactive storytelling up to eleven, allowing you to control characters and shape their stories, sometimes even making characters completely from scratch. But what would it be like to see a predefined player character act out their personality on their own, without any control from the player? Let's take a look at the only game I know of that does this to a significant degree.

Pathologic Classic HD gives you an option to play as three predefined characters. All three characters arrive at the town a day before an epidemic is about to strike, each having their own reasons for being there, each having their own methods for treating sickness and each having their own ideas about how to isolate and stop the plague. The opening scene, with the three of them arguing on a stage, is perhaps my favourite introduction to player characters that I can remember in recent memory. Now you're given a choice of who you want to pick. For this theme, the choice is irrelevant. What is relevant is that while you're playing the character you choose, the other two characters are actually carrying out their goals to the best of their skills as well. You will often hear remarks about them and in rare cases, interact with them. Eventually you will complete your character's storyline, and then the real fun begins.

Selecting a different character and starting from the beginning, you begin to see differences.

The characters you just played are seemingly now inadequate. They're close-minded, rude, or just incapable of handling the task ahead of them. Meanwhile, the character you are now, is making strides that that the character was incapable of when out of the player's control. This pattern continues when you play the final character also. Essentially, the player character drives the characters to be the best version of themselves. In the context of the story, success is only likely if the player is dictating a course of action. The outcome otherwise would be that the three player characters would be unable to work out their differences and the epidemic would consume the town, making the player fundamental. In saying that, the player is fundamental regardless. There would be no story without the player, whoever that might be.

All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players.

13

Half-Minute Hero

Or a brief critique on the commodification of the end of the world

BY

PARTISAN_ROHAN

LEFT: NEOSEEKER

ABOVE NEOSEEKER

The world is ending. The point of no return has nearly passed. Yet the decline can be halted, even reversed. How much are you willing to pay for humanity's survival?

The 2009 PSP game, *Half-Minute Hero (HMH)*, developed by Opus, uses this question as its starting point for a prescient critique of planetary destruction. *HMH* can loosely be defined as an RPG, one where every turn is 30 seconds. That's 30 seconds to make it to the castle and stop the evil lord's world-ending spell.

It's impossible to make it to the castle in a single 30-second run and this is where *HMH*'s most salient character and mechanism is introduced: the Time Goddess.

The Time Goddess arrives to help our Hero save the world. Conveniently, she tells us she has the ability to "rewind time," restoring the 30-second timer to the start. To reverse time, however, you must worship at the altars of the Time Goddess (scattered around the map) and to do that you must pay her in gold. "Well...I love money! <3" she declares to the Hero. "I'll help you, but you're going to give me the money you get."

Despite its cute pixel graphics and the lofty, fantastical adventure at hand, *HMH*'s gameplay is a genuine parody of contemporary capitalist relations. The Time Goddess is the perfect representation of the economic concept of commodification and Opus studio makes this obvious at several points. "Why does [rewinding time] cost money? Because time is money!" the Time Goddess exclaims. Your labour-time in the game—which takes the form of killing enemies—has a monetary value. You're rewarded with gold coins that can then be exchanged for more time to kill more enemies. In essence, the Hero is a worker, who like all workers, labours to make money that can be exchanged for goods and services. This is common in the gaming world, but *HMH* goes one further: you labour to buy yourself the time just to finish the game.

On one level, this mirrors the way people labour in jobs to buy back free time in the form of holidays. On another level, *HMH* offers an even more dire warning: as a species we are labouring to regain our collective time in the hope we can prevent civilisational collapse.

The Time Goddess—who controls the value of time, the foundation of capitalist relations—has no real interest in helping humanity survive unless she can line her pockets: "I hope we'll have a profit—I mean, fulfilling relationship!" she tells the Hero. How is it even possible that the survival of the human species has a price? It's a question we should ask when governments and polluting companies contemplate whether or not to stop using fossil fuels. Why is their first consideration making the green transition economically profitable?

HMH is a necessary reminder that saving our planet should never be about making profit. Our collective survival depends on resisting those who propagate this trend.

GENRE: FIGHTING

DEVS: UNEXPECTED DEVELOPMENT, DELPHINE SOFTWARE INTERNATIONAL, TIERTEX DESIGN STUDIOS, BIG DEEZ PRODUCTIONS

RELEASE: 1994

The opposite of Street Fight 2 Turbo

BY
DEPRESSEDMETFAN

Hi everyone. In issue #1, I wrote about my experience with one of the greatest fighting games ever, *Street Fighter 2 Turbo*. Today, this article covers the complete opposite as I will be discussing the one, the only, *Shaq Fu*.

On the Christmas I received the Super Nintendo/Super Famicom, I remember receiving a few games, such as *Donkey Kong Country*, *Super Mario World*, *WWF Raw*, and finally, *Shaq Fu*. I should've known based on Shaq's "I just farted so deal with it" look on the front of the cover it was pure trash, and even back then at nine or ten years old, I was smart enough to understand this was the first bad game I would ever play.

First, there's the game's story mode–and yes, this game does indeed have a story. The story is about Shaq, who just happens to be walking around in Tokyo the day before playing a charity game where he stumbles upon a Kung-Fu dojo. Inside the dojo, the shop owner asks Shaq for some reason to go through a door that just happens to contain a portal to save his grandson.
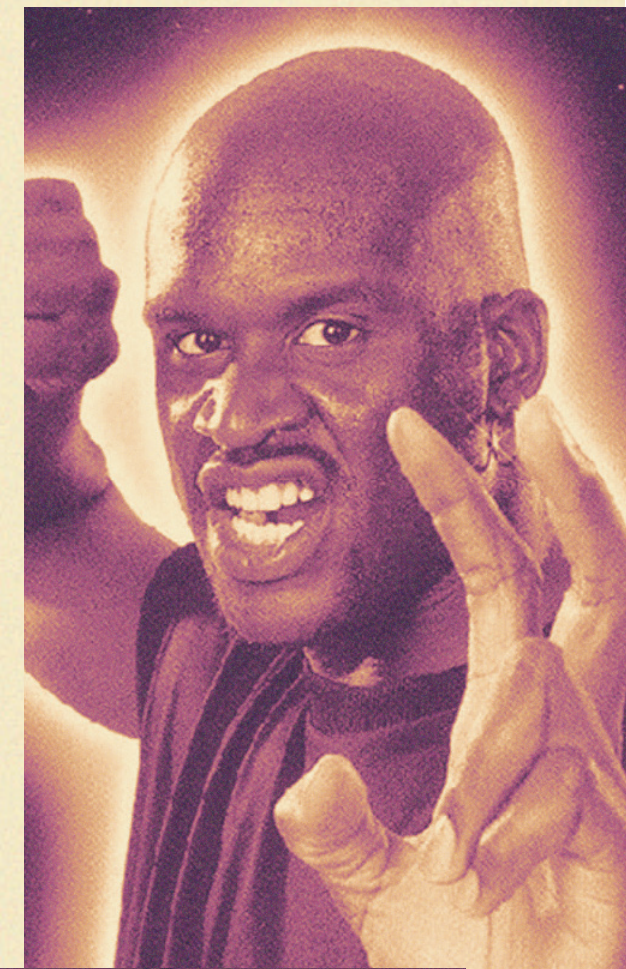
Being the friendly guy Shaq is, he decides to listen to the mysterious stranger. This is the best part of the game.

You then travel to seven different stages fighting different characters, having to experience some of the worst fighting game gameplay that's ever existed. You only have three credits in story mode and once you lose all your credits, it's game over and you have to start the mode all over from the beginning.

Gameplay wise, each character has special moves like *Street Fighter II*, but good luck pulling them off as the inputs don't always work. The jumps are also really floaty, not in a *Virtua Fighter/Tekken* "it's 3D so it's okay as it's a new technology" kind of way, but rather it just feels awful. The game also has a shield mechanic you can use to block projectiles along with forward and back dashes, but as with the jumping, movement in general feels very sluggish, which can be rectified a bit by changing the game speed from Normal to Fast. There's also a "Fury"

meter that fills up as you take damage where once it fills, you can do extra damage for a few seconds.

Now that I've typed over 300 words describing how awful this game is, I'm going to end this article by suggesting you play it. Besides, you know you want to. You know you want to experience how floaty the jumps are. You know you want to experience the one of a kind story mode. Most of all, you know you want to experience the awfulness of this game as there definitely haven't been too many other fighting games this bad.
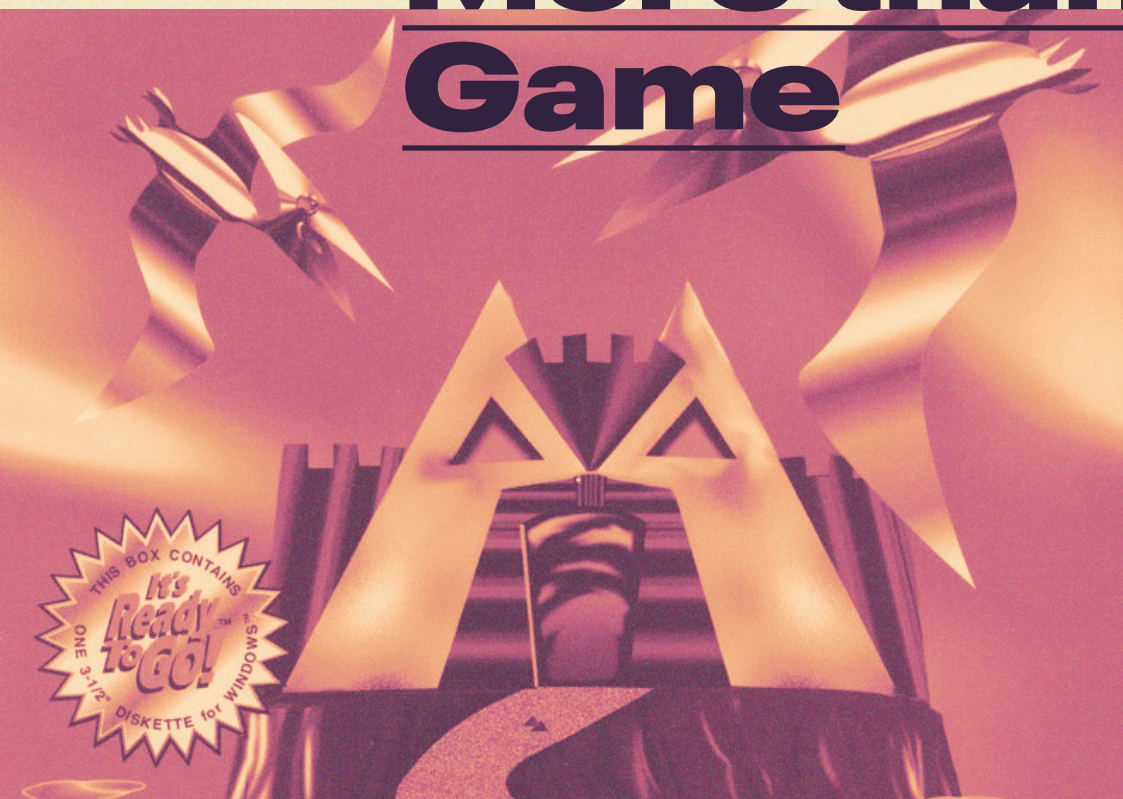

*TOP LEFT:
AL82 RETROGAMING
LONGPLAYS*

TOP RIGHT: ALLGAMERS

BOTTOM RIGHT: IMDB

Castle of the Winds

When the Memories are More than the Game

BY
MINSC

GENRE: RPG, ADVENTURE

DEV: SAADASOFT

RELEASE: 1989

How does this relate to *Castle of the Winds*? With no money and laptops given to us for the low, low price of free, we found refuge in a site called Home of the Underdogs specializing in free downloads of abandonware. One day, a newer entry appeared, *Castle of the Winds*. It was already twenty years old by that point, but what mattered most was that it ran well on our dumpster fire laptops.

CotW is a very simple turn-based RPG dungeon crawler. The journey kicks off in a small town. Your objective is to go down twenty-five levels of a dungeon finding items, killing monsters and trying not to get cursed. Some say there is a plot when you get halfway through the game; people who tell you such things are not to be trusted, as only madmen have gotten that far in *CotW*.

The game is controlled only with the keyboard, the numpad is used to navigate the world and dungeons. You can attack by moving directly into any of the badly-drawn monsters, and you can pick up and equip items and manage your inventory all with keybinds.

Someone told me all the time practicing in Microsoft Paint would never help with the skills needed to make video games. Well, *CotW* proves they were right: in no way should MS Paint ever
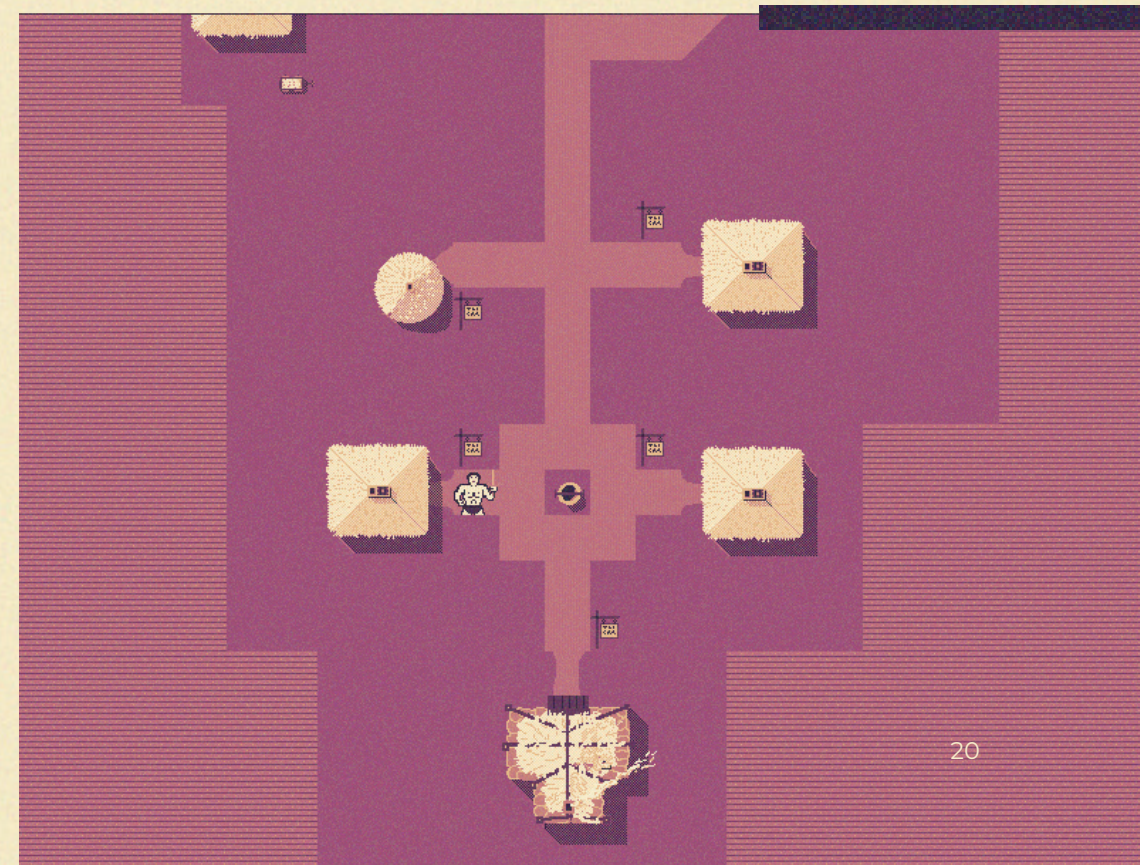
be used as a graphical engine for any video game. Making the game entirely text-based would have been a blessing. I would love to mention audio, however the creator appears to have a hatred for sound files and refused to add any to *CotW*.

We never beat the game, but what it offered was a game you could keep hidden during class or work, a distraction in otherwise hectic-filled moments of our lives.

I decided to get a real world review from my son (please don't let anyone know I forced my kid to play Windows 3.x games): "My eyes! What is this? How do I move? I have to use the numpad, that's stupid! Where do I go? Hey, I killed a rat I think."

Why trust that glowing review when you can test yourself on a fan-made recreation for free? I personally guarantee it is better than *Metal Knights*.

Our editor strongly encouraged us not to pick obscure, ugly games to make her job easier...I'm sorry, please don't sack me. Spreading awareness of early Windows abandonware games is the only joy I have left...that and my package of baby carrots! I made it y'all $$$.

There are games that have an impact on you, not because of the game. But a special place due to the time and people who shared it with you, times you never get back:

The year was 2003. I spent most of my days cutting class in school and hanging with friends. We had time, not money, being poorer than poor. Our priorities were only the finest of vodka from the lowest of shelves. For food, we quickly saw carrots were both dirt cheap and filling. Not baby carrots, those were considered rich man's carrots and a luxury compared to the price of raw whole carrots. Also if you haven't paid for gas with fifty-three cents in change to make itjust a few miles, you haven't lived.

*LEFT:
PLAYCLASSIC.GAMES*

*RIGHT:
MYABANDONWARE*

LEFT: EUROGAMER

RIGHT: PC WORLD
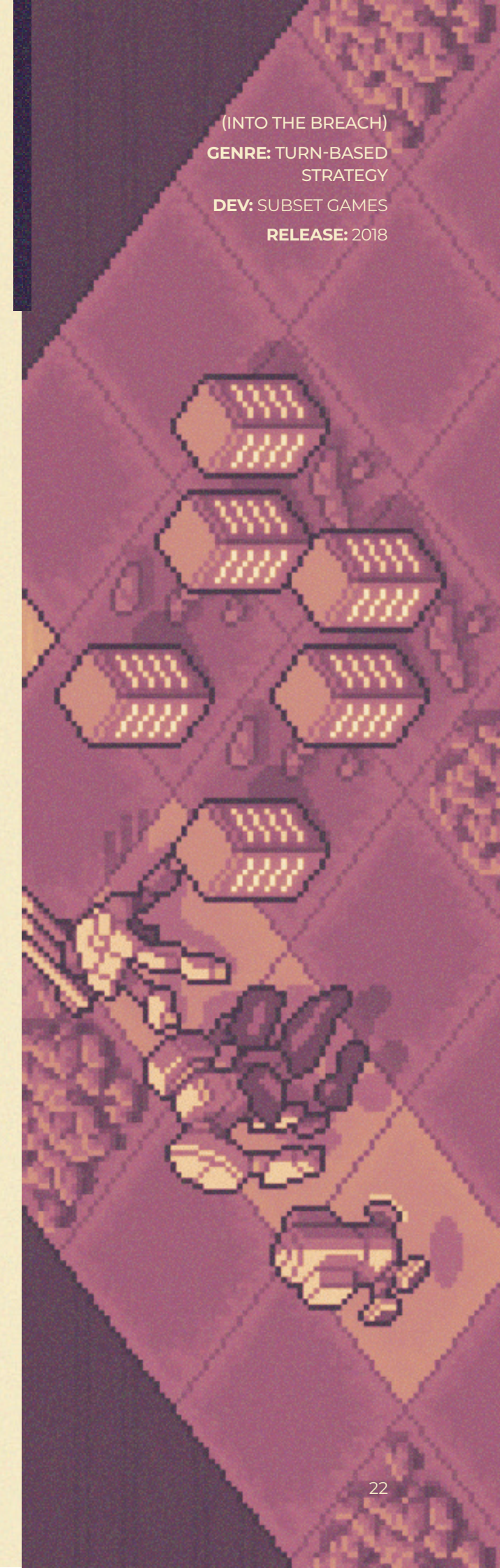
Impactful Choices

BY

RANJA

My squad is in trouble. Aliens are bearing down on us from all directions. One is on the building above; others are flanking my squad from the left. I can hear the rasping, guttural screaming of another pod on the right and time to reach the transmitter is rapidly running out...

So I get up and make myself a cup of tea while I ponder my next move. After all, that sectoid can wait while I plan my turn. This is the joy of turn-based games like *XCOM*. Sure, there is tension, but you always have the time to consider your actions. And my two favourites of the genre are the aforementioned *XCOM* series and *Into the Breach*. Both of these games have very differing approaches to turn-based combat but both succeed in the way that matters—making your choices meaningful and distinct.

XCOM is an exercise in playing the odds. The best-laid plans can go awry when you miss that 95% chance to hit or that enemy you blinded hits a miracle 1% shot that kills your strongest soldier (no, I'm not still angry about something that happened years ago, why do you ask?). You may know the enemies and their abilities like the back of your hand, but you still need to use that knowledge effectively to get through the game. One day I will beat this game in Legendary Ironman mode.

Into the Breach stands in contrast to this, with smaller engagements that can almost be solved like a puzzle because you have perfect information. At the start of your turn, you know exactly what the enemy will do on their turn and the trick is finding the best move to position yourself for the next wave of enemies.

Both games have good and engaging turn-based combat for many reasons. But in the end, it boils down to a single thing:

Your choices matter.

If you move a soldier or take a shot in *XCOM*, that's it. There is no undo button; you make your choice, and you live with it. Hit or miss, live or die. *Into the Breach* does allow you to undo moves, but once you fire your weapon or press that end turn button, there is no going back. Your choices have an immediate and palpable effect.

Not only are your choices permanent, but there are also significant differences between your choices. Firing a rocket isn't just a choice for AoE damage, it also destroys any cover and so changes the shape of the battlefield. This is a concept that *Into the Breach* particularly loves playing with; almost every shot has an impact on your foes and how they interact with the environment and each other.

These choices being meaningful help us build a connection with our characters. That sharpshooter that you love for saving your squad a few times was able to do this because you put them where they are most effective. Losing that soldier later in your campaign because you screwed up hurts more because of it. That's why I love these games and keep on coming back for just one more turn.

Genshin Impact

The Best Game to Never Recommend

GENRE: ACTION RPG
DEVS: MIHOYO
RELEASE: 2020

*BY*

AVIDANIA

Andrius, Dominator of Wolves

DISCLAIMER: I don't endorse in any way people spending thousands of dollars for that one character or weapon in one game at all. If you have gambling issues, please seek professional help and avoid these games at all costs.

That said, *Genshin Impact* is great! Despite taking a break or two, I pick it up again. And this is because it has been constantly updated every 5–6 weeks with new regions, events, story beats across two years. *Two. Years.* Already four huge locations are available to explore, filled with puzzles and secrets to find.

Hang on, is this not a gacha game? You are correct but it's rare to have a game with an open world for something that was supposed to be inherently predatory. One obvious reason is the characters. You'd be hard-pressed to not find them being the big show in this game.

The movesets are simplistic at its core. A series of basic attacks, charged attack, a plunge attack from the high skies. A single basic skill and an "ultimate." The characters are distributed based on six elements in the game, and four different weapon types. An example, one would have a Pyro (fire) element wielding a spear weapon type. For how many characters there are, each is incredibly different from one to another, give or take some similarities. There is something for everyone, and there's no harm if you don't want them.
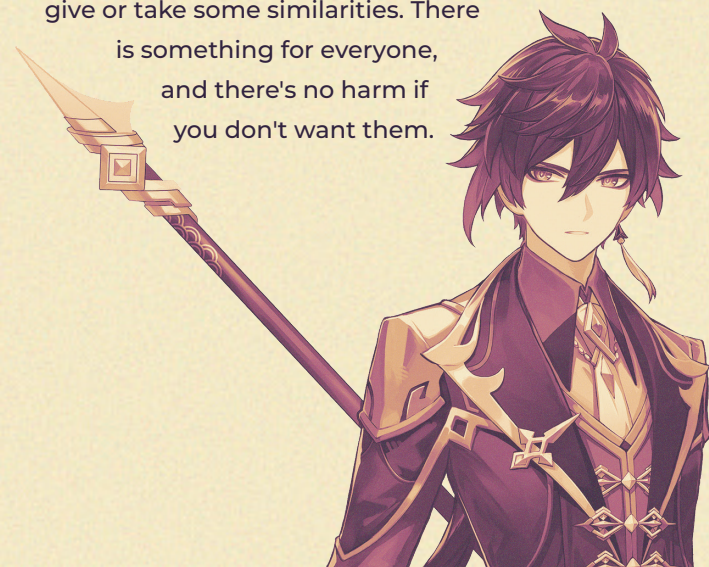
Patches roll in quick, each lasting about five or six weeks (minus some COVID-19 complications), with new locations every patch or two, and characters becoming increasingly bombastic in both their design and attacks. You'll never feel behind even if you don't have what the community claims are "meta" characters.

Many gachas have PvP via leaderboards, or direct battles. It's how they keep players engaged. While it can be passable at best, it's telling that many are designed for the "whales," or people who spend too much time and money in a single game as newly released characters overpower the older characters, rendering them useless.

And that's what's great about *Genshin.* There is no rush to the end or pressure to have "meta" characters. The locations themselves are visually impressive to stop and stare at. The first region being Mondstadt, it's like an archetypical fantasy region you'd see in a JRPG. As you explore beyond the region, the landscape begins to improve on itself, showing a new world nestled within all its grandeur, accompanied with the excellent soundtrack that was made by none

other than Yu-Peng Chen, alongside Hoyomix (also released officially on YouTube!!).

And there is (as of the 9th of December and being hooked to it) even a trading card game! Completely free! Not your thing? There is a place to build furniture and place them however you wish à la *Animal Crossing.* Exploring the entire world? Of course! Simply doing dailies and logging off after? No problem!

And yet, for all the consistently amazing development cycle, the visual treats, the simple yet satisfying gameplay, the music spectacular, plus the many characters that come and go over time, I can never with all my heart recommend this game to anyone. The artstyle is off-putting for many. While the gacha is minimal at best, it is inherently predatory and the story itself takes a good while to take it above the quality that's satisfying and engaging.

Genshin Impact is a great game, but one I could never recommend to someone, no matter how much I enjoyed it personally.

How JRPGs Suffer from Tradition

BY

JOAS

BELOW: JUSTPUSHSTART (FINAL FANTASY X)

The classic style of turn-based JRPGs garners a lot of praise about their stories, their world, and to a lesser extent, their mechanics. The theoretical systems of combat can be very well-crafted, allowing for immense creativity and strategy, but rarely live up to the task. Often, the speed of the combat mechanics is more appreciated, as it means random encounters are over as fast as possible.

Random battles are a mechanic whose main benefit in early JRPGs was to extend the length of a game that needed to be developed with extreme restrictions. Besides that, it gives players an unending supply of XP to level up as needed, and has the opportunity to provide a wealth of content if the combat mechanic is interesting enough. Here lies the issue, however. As it is an infinite, and relatively frequent, supply of combat encounters, it must be relatively simple. If each random battle is too complicated, it takes too long for players to work through it, and becomes an enormous timesink. And even if it is, the increase in levels means the more you engage with it, the easier and less challenging it becomes. As such, unless the player is severely underleveled and the mechanics are well-crafted, it results in an experience that is merely uninteresting at best, and a complete waste of time at worst.

This problem with traditional JRPGs has been side-stepped by changing the combat, such as in action RPGs or tactical RPGs. However there is potential for these systems, and I think the biggest solution is to massively decrease the amount of combat, allowing for each encounter to be longer, and more engaging. A frequent solution that's posed is to decrease the encounter rate, but this is merely decreasing the severity of the issue, and so a better option would be to completely remove random battles.

In this imaginary game, each combat encounter would be unique—similar to what boss battles would be like in a normal JRPG. However, these don't have to be that grand, they can just be a simple, yet interesting and hand-crafted battle. This would result in a combat mechanic that actually produces consistently interesting gameplay, even if it is not as frequent. This does leave us with the question of experience and levels. If the encounters are set, how do you work to gain extra levels? We could utilize secondary mechanics, but the set encounters give us an opportunity to perfectly balance every instance of combat, possibly even going to the point of removing experience points and leveling altogether. Ultimately, it's possible that JRPGs are better off without a core staple of the RPG formula.

Thank you for reading!

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