

#15

The Monthly Silly

BAROQUE

A maddening journey of distorted delusions through the Nerve Tower

I don't think he likes it here very much...



This guy's willing to give it a shot, though!

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15 – The Yap Trap

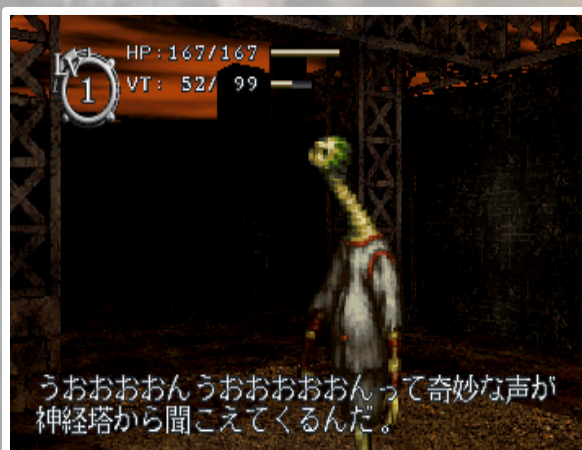
Just me rambling about whatever I feel like. Always something gaming-related, but generally not about a specific individual game.

Silly Spotlight 1

BAROQUE

Baroque is a first-person action RPG released by Sting for the Sega Saturn in 1998, and later on PS1 in 1999. It also had a vastly inferior remake on PS2 and Wii, but this review will focus on the Saturn version. It was only released in Japan, hence some screenshots being in Japanese, but there's an English patch online.

Playing this game can be a disorienting experience, especially early on. After an intro cutscene that doesn't really explain anything, you're dropped into a dark, industrial town illuminated solely by the bright red sky, your only company being NPCs with names like "Neck Thing" and "Sack Thing" who babble incoherent nonsense at you. Eventually, you bump into the Archangel, who gives you a thing called the Angelic Rifle and tasks you with heading down into the Nerve Tower.



This game absolutely does not hold your hand in any sense of the word. You're left to basically figure out how to play the game yourself, and the story is told less through easily decipherable cutscenes or dialogue and more the vague mumblings of people like the friendly-looking fellow on the left. That's Neck Thing, if you couldn't tell. Baroque's story can feel very abstract at times; there are concrete events that have happened, and further events you can bring

about through your actions, but the game is very vague about a lot of this. Baroque's world is unsettling and dystopian, its inhabitants distorted by their own delusions, and you're given the task of somehow making sense of it all. The art direction greatly adds to the bizarre, nightmarish atmosphere, with everything feeling so freakishly off in the best way possible. It being on the Saturn means precise details aren't as easily visible, characters are 2D images who rotate to face you at all times, and the game does a great job of making everything just feel "wrong". It's not horror exactly, just creepy and unsettling.



Baroque's gameplay is similarly cryptic. It's a roguelike, meaning each run through the Nerve Tower is randomly generated, and dying sends you back out to the town. On each run, you'll be attacked by a variety of enemies called Grotesques; having no skills or spells of any kind, and your basic attack being generally quite weak, your main method of dealing with them comes down to the many items you'll find scattered across the floors, from bones you can gnaw on for various

short-term effects, to mysterious injections for permanent stat alterations, to things called Torturers, wide-ranging single-use attacks that target every Grotesque in a given room.

Combat can feel a bit annoying at first, but once you realize you're not supposed to just walk up to enemies and start slashing, it becomes much more fun. Certain items, like the Torturer that turns Grotesques into rotten meat and the Bone that removes rot from any meat in your inventory to make it edible, naturally work well together, so the focus on items turns it all into a tense game of resource management. At all times, you have to think about when you should engage Grotesques in combat vs running away, whether it's best to use more items in a fight or just take a few hits and use your regular attack, and which items you should hold onto and which should be removed to free up inventory space.



The game isn't without its flaws, though. Befitting the rest of the game's nature, progression is extremely obtuse, often reliant on talking to one specific NPC who only appears on one floor of the Nerve Tower and who you may or may not run into, or requiring you to do a sequence of actions you would probably never naturally think of. It's unfortunate, too; so much of Baroque's appeal is firmly rooted in its atmosphere, its surreal,

bizarrely off-putting world and characters. In theory, it's the sort of game you should play completely blind, with absolutely no idea what you're in for, but a guide is basically necessary to get anywhere with it in practice.

I really like this game. Its story and world are endlessly fascinating, its atmosphere unlike anything else I've ever played, and the moment-to-moment gameplay, while not perfect, is still generally really enjoyable. It's just a shame that it outright refuses to even so much as hint at what it expects from you.

Final Score	
Gameplay - 7	9
Story - 10	
Look/Sound - 10	

Silly Spotlight 2

RADIANT HISTORIA

Radiant Historia is a turn-based RPG released by Atlus for the DS in 2010. It also has a remake called Perfect Chronology on the 3DS, but that one's ugly and weird so I'm talking about the DS version.

The game is set during a war between the world's two major powers, Alistel and Granorg. You play as Stocke, an Alistellian intelligence agent who comes into possession of the White Chronicle, a book that allows the user to travel in time with some limits. Using the powers of this book, he has to swap between two timelines, one where he remains in the Special Intelligence division and one where he leaves to serve as a soldier in a brigade led by his friend Rosch, in order to prevent the mysterious process of desertification threatening to engulf the entire continent and destroy both Alistel and Granorg.

I love this premise. Most JRPG protagonists tend to be unimpressive silent types who know nothing about the world they've been suddenly thrust into, allowing those around them to explain everything to them, and by extension the player. They're less "characters" and more vessels through which the player can experience the world. I don't think this type of protagonist is "bad" necessarily, or that you can't tell a good story with one, but this being the norm makes Stocke stand out all the more as a uniquely interesting character who's already very competent by the time we meet him. Stocke being firmly embedded in Alistel's inner machinations works far better than the alternative, allowing the game to get right into the dense narrative of political intrigue without wasting any time. The plot is, broadly speaking, excellent, a dense fantasy narrative with thoroughly likeable characters and a fascinatingly layered setting.



2010.11.3 + RELEASE(?)

That's all well and good, but how is it to actually play? Well... ehhhh??? You bring 3 party members into battle, and enemies fall on a 3x3 grid, with certain skills targeting multiple spaces on the grid or being able to push enemies around onto different spaces. This means that, aside from having to consider building your party around using physical or magical attacks, you also have to consider which characters' skills will target which spaces, and which other characters will be able to help them use those skills effectively. Party customization is a dense, interesting puzzle... when the game lets you do it.



Radiant Historia is a perfect example of a game that feels held hostage by its narrative. Aside from the many moments early on where the game features barely any actual gameplay aside from talking to a person who tells you to walk across the town to talk to another person and so on and so forth, characters frequently enter and exit your party. The main trio of Stocke, Marco and Raynie are nearly always available, but the other four characters often leave your party for long periods of time after they've joined, because the plot requires them to be somewhere else. This isn't always too bad, when you're limited slightly it can be interesting to work within those limits, but when it's just the main three, the game's main avenue for interesting decision-making is cut off entirely.



This is compounded by the eventual realization that the difficulty is basically fake. The game gives you such an excess of money that you'll basically never run out of powerful healing items, meaning that every battle in practice comes down to a balancing act between hitting the enemy and mitigating the mild annoyance of having been hit or inflicted with a status ailment by having any party member fully heal any other at any time. This isn't always too disastrous, optimizing your party so you can end battles as efficiently as possible is still a fun process, but that's assuming the game is allowing you to change your party layout at all, which for a good chunk of the first 15 hours, it probably isn't. Even putting all that aside, battle animations are slow, and enemies often annoyingly take their turn first, so you'll frequently have to sit through 5 or 6 enemies' animations before you get to do anything. And even after all that, you might have to waste a turn or two healing or recovering from an ailment using one of your countless stockpiled healing items before you can go all out.

Radiant Historia is great, but only if you're a certain kind of person. If you can accept a game that's only sometimes enjoyable to play and tends to reuse the same handful of songs, there's a really engaging story buried underneath it all. If, however, you value fun and engaging gameplay in your RPGs, and aren't the type who can simply "push through for the story", then I can't recommend it. Great game actively held back by its medium, should have been a series of fantasy novels.

Final Score	
Gameplay - 3	6
Story - 10	
Look/Sound - 6	

Kill Your Friends!

Klonoa™

Beach Volleyball

Klonoa Beach Volleyball is a sports spinoff of the Klonoa series, released in 2002 for the PS1. You play as a team of two Klonoa characters, and have to compete to win the Volleyball tournament!



I'm not sure why this game exists, but I'm still glad it does. Yoshihiko Arai's art continues to be as wonderful here as it is in everything else, and as someone who really likes these characters, it's just fun to see them in a more relaxed environment like this. It's also the only game in the series to feature English voice acting of the characters saying actual words, which since it was never released in America, means the characters are all British now. Guntz with a

thick cockney accent isn't something I'd ever considered, but it makes sense for him, so I've decided this is what he sounds like now.

I also really love the way this game's character models look. For plenty of these characters, this game is their only fully 3D appearance, and even for the ones like Klonoa, Popka and Tat who've had full 3D models in other games, there's something really charming about how aggressively polygonal the models in this game specifically are. That aside, it's also very clear that these models are more trying to be 3D versions of the Arai art rather than being their own thing, marking the start of when this 2D pseudo-anime style became a core part of the series' identity. Kind of makes me wish we got a game later on that fully went all in on the "Arai art in 3D" idea, as great as Lunatea's Veil's visual style is.



Anyway, usually the pattern with these reviews is that if I don't talk about the core gameplay until the second page that means it's bad in some way, but no this game's actually very fun. Admittedly I don't exactly play a lot of games about volleyball, so I'm not sure how this one stacks up against the rest of what I assume is a real genre that exists, but I enjoyed my time with this one. One mechanic I liked was the Special Shot system; if you manage to get the ball to hit your opponent's side of the court, as well as scoring a point, a space on your 3x3 grid in the top corner of the screen will light up, corresponding to where on the opponent's side the ball landed. If you can create a line of 3 spaces on your grid, you gain the ability to perform a Special Shot, each one doing something different; Klonoa's has a tornado effect, Guntz's explodes, etc.



Special Shots are both more powerful and get you more points if you can pull them off, the point total increasing the more lines of 3 you have on your grid. Once you use them, though, your grid is fully cleared out, so you have to be sure you'll be able to land them successfully. I really like this mechanic; in order to quickly gain access to your Special Shot, you have to be strategic about where on the opponent's side of the court you try to send the ball. If you just target the same few

blind spots, you're more likely to get points in the short term, but this leaves you unable to effectively fill your grid. Additionally, from a defending perspective, you have to consider which grid spots your opponent has filled in, and defend accordingly so they don't gain access to their own Special Shot. It really adds an extra layer of strategy on both ends, I like it a lot.

Overall, Klonoa Beach Volleyball is a fun game. Aside from everything I just went over, it also features unique endings for each character depending on who you used to clear the main arcade mode, which are generally light, silly little things, perfect for if you're like me and just really enjoy watching these characters be put in situations. There's not a huge amount to do here aside from try to unlock characters, but if you enjoy the main volleyball gameplay, you'll definitely like this one.

Final Score	
Gameplay - 8	7
Story - 6	
Look/Sound - 8	

Easy Emulation

Quest Brian's Journey

Quest: Brian's Journey might be the most video game ass video game I've ever played. Released in 2000 for the Gameboy Colour, you play as Brian, and must journey across Celtland to find the Four Elemental Amulets.

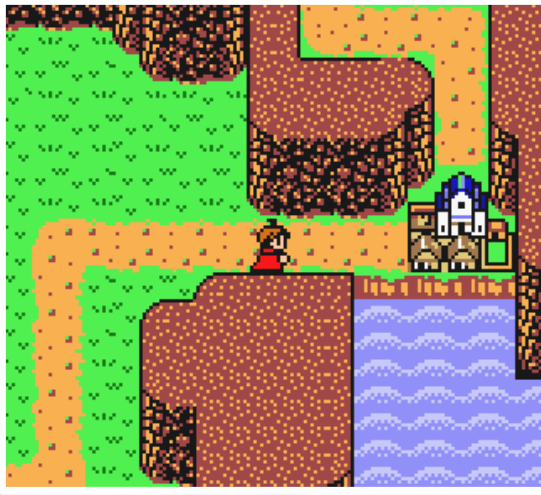
The combat is probably the most interesting thing about the game. You have four types of elemental spells available, Earth, Water, Fire and Air. During your turn, you can move around a short distance, hit enemies with your staff, or use spells. When you open the spell menu, you can input up to three directions, each one corresponding to an element, in order to construct your spell. For example, if you input Fire > Fire like in the left image, you'll get a LV2 Fire Ball, but if you use Fire >



Water you'll get Hot Steam, and Fire > Wind gives you a Homing Arrow. Building on that, you can use Fire > Wind > Earth for Magma Ball, Fire > Wind > Fire for Compression, and so on.



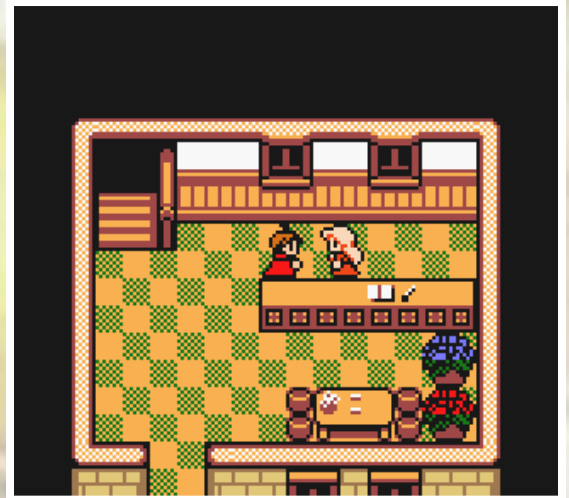
I really like this system. It feels like you're playing as some sort of alchemist, mixing and matching elements to see what concoctions you can come up with. The different spells are nearly all useful too, with different ones having different area of effect ranges to target multiple enemies or applying different status buffs to you on use, so you won't just be using a select few. You don't get them all from the start, either; you have to level up your different elements over the course of the game, with each spell requiring its starting element to be of a certain level to use it. This gives the game a great loop of discovery, with the player leveling up certain elements, experimenting to see what new spells they can come up with, and leveling up some more. Unfortunately, you stop getting new spells around the halfway mark, making the game feel significantly more dull, but it's still a fun system.



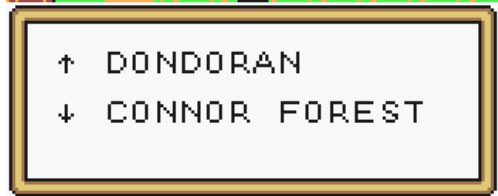
The gameplay isn't perfect, though, the main issue being how pitifully easy it is. Most enemies won't be capable of dealing any serious damage, healing through both spells and items is abundant, I think the first boss might have been the only time where I actually died playing this game. Experimenting with new spells is fun, but once you've unlocked all of them, there's not really much else to do. And it's not like the story saves it, either; each area has some weird side plot going on in an attempt to flesh them out, but none of it connects at all,

and I didn't find any of these side plots at all interesting enough individually to be worth caring about. Ok, there is one kind of cool moment at the desert temple near the end, but that's it.

Magic system aside, this game is so generic there's really nothing else to talk about with it. But... that's kind of what I like about it? It's a game called "Quest" where you go on a top-down, turn-based adventure through a vaguely medieval fantasy land, casting fireball spells at enemy skeletons and drinking potions to restore health on your Quest to retrieve the four Macguffins themed around the four elements. It feels like a fake game you'd see a character in a TV show playing, or maybe what an alien might make if they were given the task of reconstructing the concept of a "video game" from ancient manuscripts long after humanity has passed away, there's something very



charming about the whole thing.



And, fittingly for such a game, Quest is also possibly the most 5/10 game I've ever played. Combat is inoffensive, kind of easy and boring once you unlock all the spells but nothing so egregious as to make you put the game down entirely. The story is a nothingburger with a few hollow attempts at "something" here and there, but aside from the awkward translation, it's nothing outright terrible or disappointing. The pixel art is nice enough, I suppose. I

don't think I've ever come away from a game feeling so not strongly in either direction about it, and to me, that makes this one fascinating in its own weird way.

Final Score	
Gameplay - 6	5
Story - 5	
Look/Sound - 5	

Shame Corner

Nubby's Number Factory

Nubby's Number Factory is a game of some sort released last year by MogDogBlog. It's quite a strange thing, in that it's actually very good at what it sets out to do, and it's got a certain endearing quality that makes it entirely impossible to actually hate; I just also think "what it sets out to do" is a bit pointless and possibly evil.

You play as a worker at the Number Factory, and have to launch Nubby at the floating number pegs in order to pop them. When Nubby hits a peg, its number is halved, and you gain points equal to said number; if the peg only has 1 point left, it's fully popped, and disappears. Nubby continues bouncing around until he falls off the board; if you met the current round's point total, the board is restocked and you move onto the next, otherwise you lose a life. Run out of lives and the sun explodes.



The game's strongest point is its utterly demented art style. It's made to mimic that strange, uncanny quality of particularly bad early 3D graphics, and I personally really like it. It goes all in on the surreal strangeness for maximum comedy, with in-game items ranging from "monstrosities" which summon "disease orbs" to pop pegs for you, to Pedro. The Number Factory as a setting is a bizarre, nonsensical place, and there's a really fun novelty in seeing the different items and what they do.

Sure, there's a rotating flaming skull item that sometimes makes the board explode when you die, why not. The game's not actually in 4:3 though, I just cropped it that way for the Vibes and also because it's easier to show big images that way. And besides, a review of this game just pretending it's in a different aspect ratio feels fitting for such a silly thing.

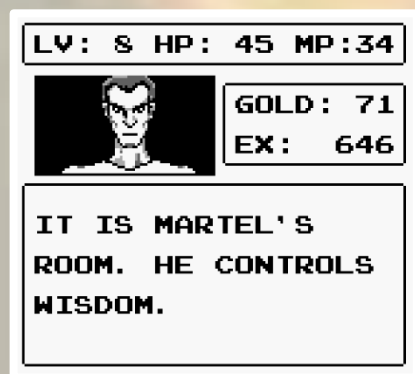
Guest Edition!
BY STARSMASHER

THE SWORD OF HOPE

The Sword of Hope is an RPG for the Game Boy made by Kemco in 1989 before being localised and released worldwide in 1991. It's a game resembling a point and click adventure game with various scenes featuring objects you can interact with using one of three commands, being "look", "open" and "hit". Alongside this, you do battle with various enemies and you move around the map with arrows in the bottom left that go north, north east, east, etc.



Being fully transparent, this game sucks dookie butt. Despite this, I'm going to open with the good stuff. The format is cool, I'm very fond of how you move around the map and the idea of having three point and click commands which you use on the little picture you see in the top left is cute! The visuals are strange but charming. ...that's it, that's all I really like.



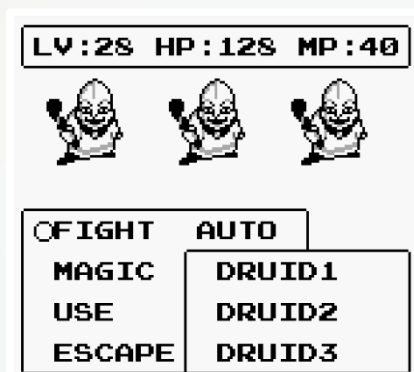
Let's open with the story. It's a pretty simple affair. You're the son of a king who went mad because an evil dragon took over his heart, but you were saved by an old man before the king could kill you and the castle sunk underground due to three wizards sealing it down there. Now that you're older, grandpa sends you to find The Sword Of Hope™ in order to stop the dragon and you must talk to three wizards in order to find it. Also all the people are trees. It's very basic stuff, it doesn't really get more

complex than that at all, and that annoys me when you compare it to some RPGs with outstanding stories.

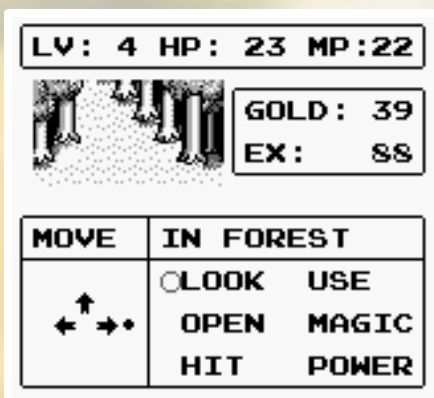
The overworld gameplay gets old really fast due to falling into typical trappings that point and click adventure games do. The puzzles that this game throws at you are sometimes impossible to really figure out without a guide, and are usually strange strings of actions you have to do in order to get an item that one of the wizards ask you to get. Expect stuff like "Get a spell you can miss you'll only use once and use it in this one room to get a trinket and then use that trinket in the room right next to it to get the thing you were looking for" happening a LOT over the course of the game. With a guide it's just tedious but without it? It's a miserable experience where you'll have to trial and error a lot and get punished for trialling on the way.

I did use a guide later on in this game and I'm not ashamed to admit that. Doesn't help this game has a pretty shoddy localisation, so maybe a lot of these solutions would be more obvious in the original text.

The rest of this review is dedicated to how bad the combat is. There's some games with really basic combat, but Sword of Hope takes the cake for having basic combat which is also miserable to play. The magic spells you can cast come in three types: damage spells, healing spells and status spells. Stat changing status spells can be useful early game in order to survive some rough early encounters, but by the end of the game they're negligible. This isn't mentioning the few status spells which actually apply status effects, which are just always useless. Healing spells are actually very useful! They work as you'd expect. You heal and that's it.



Damage spells are insanely strange. For the majority of the game you'll be running different levels of Fireball, Lightning and Bagefire (which is wind) that do different amounts of damage depending on the enemy they hit. This is good! Incentivises using these three different variations. The issue with them is the levels, with level 1 having a chance to backfire for some reason, 2 just being a guaranteed single enemy hit, 3 hitting everyone including yourself and 4 hitting everyone except yourself. Until you get 2 and 4, you sort of have to steer clear of 1 and 3 unless if you're okay with risking taking chunks of unnecessary damage.



The combat includes other weird quirks like all attacks in the game having a strange amount of variance for their damage. This doesn't come from critical hits either, attacks in this game just seem to either increase or decrease by 20, which means that sometimes your attack will do 2 damage to an enemy and they will do like 5 back. Alongside everything listed prior, cryptic uses for items extends into the battles, as some items have strange effects if used for combat. The "Y Fruit" which you can use infinitely? You lose some MP for no benefit outside of battle, but it deals damage to an enemy if you're fighting! Sure! Combine all that with how evil some enemy layouts can be and that you might need to grind in order to win any late game fights and the combat goes from infuriating to MADDENING.

Overall, the game sucks. Don't play it, there's almost no point. Apparently the sequel is good, so maybe there is a reason to play this, but I'd say steer clear unless you want to force yourself through such a miserable experience.

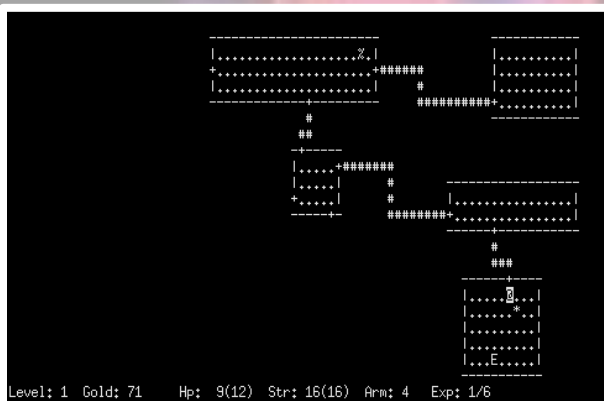
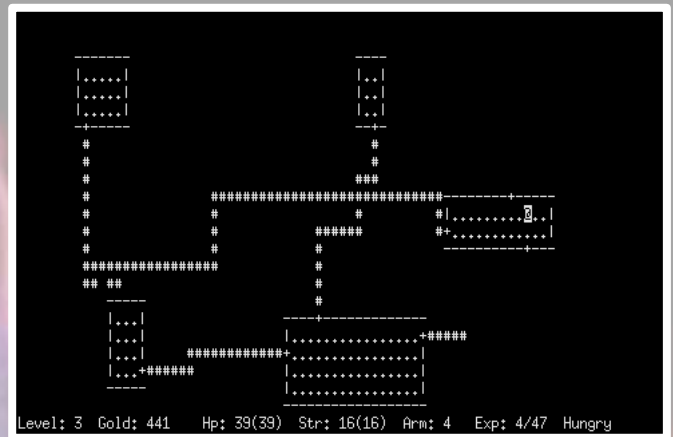


The Ancient Ones

ROGUE

I've talked about one actual Roguelike I enjoy so far in this issue, and one fake Roguelike I can't stand, so why not talk about the original! Rogue was released for Unix-based systems in 1980, and had many other enhanced re-releases in the following years; for now, I'll be talking about the original Unix release, though.

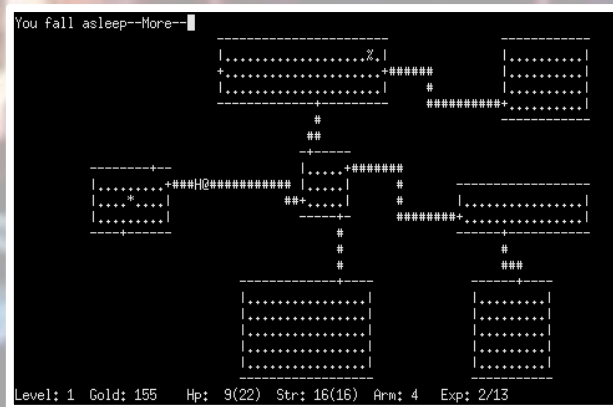
You play as an adventurer, tasked with making your way to the bottom of the dungeon to retrieve the Amulet of Yendor. True to the genre the game inspired, the dungeon's floors are randomly generated, and each time you die it's back to the start with a new random dungeon. This sense of randomness is the main thing the game is remembered for today, and it works amazingly well. Sure, each floor is just a 3x3 grid of (usually) 9 rooms, but the randomness means you never know what could be around the next corner, and can't simply memorize floor layouts and item locations to find the "optimal" route. It forces you to think on your feet, and for such a primitive game it's impressive how well it communicates the feeling of a lone adventurer wandering into a dark, unknown dungeon.



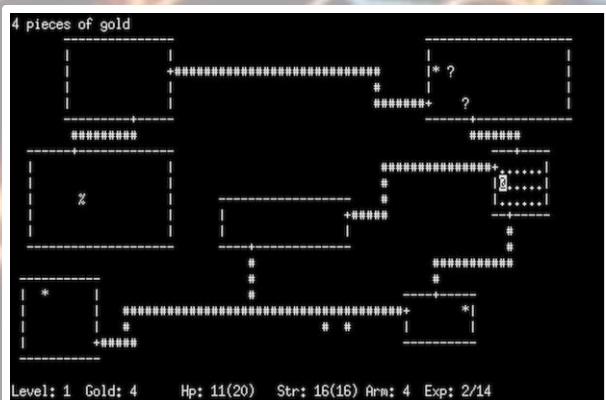
I mentioned items earlier. Those are random too! Two of the game's item types, Potions and Scrolls, have a variety of possible random effects, with Potions being named just by their colour until you figure out what that colour does and Scrolls being some gibberish like "gnothrok shkyimlun byunggu". Every potion/scroll with the same name will do the same thing, but you don't know if it'll be helpful or a

hindrance until you try using it, which adds a great risk/reward dynamic. Do you try and experiment in case it proves to be beneficial, or avoid the risk of being harmed in some way? The Scroll of Identify allows you to discern these effects without risk, but that of course still requires you to take the initial risk of reading your gibberish nonsense scroll to find out it is in fact a Scroll of Identify.

Items in general are strange in this game. Each item type has a different command associated with it; for scrolls, you press R to read them, food you press E to eat, and potions you press Q to “quaff”. The weird phrasing is because D for “drink” is already taken, that’s what you use to “drop” items, but it still means you’ll need a list of commands if you want to get anywhere with this one. Commands in general are really weird here, with the “>” symbol being used for when you want to go down the stairs, and the delete key being used to search



walls or dead ends for hidden doors. Really strange.



This aside, I mentioned that I liked the risk associated with potions and scrolls earlier, but I do think the balance can be off at times. Scrolls are generally safe, but one effect potions can have is “darkness”, making it impossible to see anything around your character to the point where enemies are simply referred to as “it” rather than their actual

names. This would be fine, were it not for the fact that it doesn’t seem to wear off. The first time I experienced it, I died shortly after and assumed it wore off after enough time had passed or you moved onto the next floor, but I survived much longer with it the second time and even made it to another floor and it still didn’t wear off. The darkness status basically kills your run entirely, it’s the most serious issue that the game has by far.

Lastly, I want to talk about the graphics. I’m sure you’ve noticed by now, but this game doesn’t have any! Since it was made to run on basically anything, it uses ASCII characters to draw its environments. Your character is represented by an @ sign, the 24 enemy types are capital letters from A to Z, and items are displayed as punctuation signs. Aside from being a clever workaround, this gives the game a really unique sense of character, as it’s reliant entirely on text and descriptions to convey its ideas. The ASCII graphics also force you to use your imagination playing it, so if you go in with the right mindset, the game can create a strong sense of environment. Seeing your little @ sign wandering through these dark, foreboding hallways and scavenging for whatever items he can find, trying to imagine what’s going through his head, it’s oddly immersive. Is he a timid new adventurer, scared by the dungeon but pushing forward anyway? A veteran hero who’s seen a thousand dungeons just like this one, and feels more bored by it than anything? I’m getting rid of that fuckass “innovation” scale, this game invented an entire genre of course it was innovative, more importantly it has atmosphere for 1980 and it deserves to be shown in the score. It’s especially effective if you find some good music to put on in the background, surprisingly great time overall.

Final Score	
Gameplay - 8	7
Story - 7	
Look/Sound - 6	



As I'm sure you've figured by now, I'm not exactly a fan of the numberslop genre. I consider them pointless time sinks, games people play because they're chasing the dopamine high of "getting the build that lets you break the game and get a billion points", and I find every aspect of their design contributes to this. With the Big Dopamine Rush locked behind builds you

can't reliably recreate, and the main gameplay not requiring much player input, there's not a lot you can do to improve from run to run. There's some degree to which you can improve, of course, but never so much that you can consistently do particularly well; after all, if pressing the Dopamine Button always worked, it'd wear off eventually, wouldn't it? And, with the lack of any clear end goal, you're free to sink in as many hundreds of hours as you wish.

There's another reason these bother me, though. Every numberslop always ends up being described as a "Roguelike", both by players and by the developers themselves, but I really don't think the term applies.

There's some variation on how strictly the term applies, and even though it's already a looser example of it, I think Baroque is a good example of an actual Roguelike. It might not have the turn-based structure, and the fact



there's actual progression and a proper story carrying over from run to run arguably might disqualify it, but it's still a game where you do various runs through a randomly generated dungeon of some sort, battling enemies along the way and picking up items you'll need to manage, with each death sending you back to the start. And with things like the floor layouts, the gradual healing over time and the fact it occasionally obscures what certain items do, it clearly gets a lot of its DNA from Rogue directly. Even putting that aside, the far more deliberate gameplay style and presence of a proper final end goal sets it and Rogue apart from the numberslop genre, I believe. Not to say Rogue itself doesn't also just decide to kill you sometimes, but that's rare, and it's still a game where you're actually doing something.

Even if I liked numberslops enough to come up with a less derogatory name for them, I'd consider the use of the term "Roguelike" to refer to them as very strange. These games all take basically nothing from Rogue, and I'd imagine were made by people who've never even played it; Vampire numberslops don't emphasize the tense and uncertain journey through randomly generated dungeons in the same way, and Balatro numberslops don't even typically feature combat of any kind. Add to that the fact that numberslop games typically either don't feature any sort of "game clear" condition at all or are built to encourage replaying them indefinitely beyond that point, and are always very obviously more inspired by either Vampire Survivors or Balatro, and I really don't see any case for these being Roguelikes at all.