#7

The Monthly Silly

SHIN MEGAMI TENSEI IV:

Quite possibly the greatest game I've ever played

New segment type! Console Chronicle: an overview of one console of my choice

fishbone

Table of Contents

1 – Silly Spotlight EX

A review of one exceptional game, that I decided deserved three pages instead of just the usual two.

4 – Easy Emulation

Two game reviews focusing on anything from before the PS1/N64, guaranteeing that if you see something interesting here and have a computer, even a bad one, you can play it for free via emulation.

7 – Kill Your Friends

Section where I recommend a good multiplayer game.

9 – Console Chronicle

A brand new section where I give an overview of one particular console of my choice, primarily focusing on the library of games it has to offer.

11 – The Yap Trap

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

13 – What's Next?

I give my thoughts on trailers and pre-release footage for a game that isn't out yet.

SHIN MEGAMI TENSEI®
真・女神転生 IV

You might have noticed that this review is three pages long! That's because Shin Megami Tensei IV, published by Atlus for the 3DS in 2013 and one of my favourite games I've ever played, is such a phenomenal game that only giving it two pages would feel like a disservice.

Shin Megami Tensei IV is an RPG in which you play as Flynn, a newly-accepted Samurai of the Eastern Kingdom of Mikado, a fictional 15th-century European country. The Samurai's job is to venture down into the deep, demon-infested caves of Naraku and battle the demons – a catch-all term for any sort of mythological creature, such as gods, evil spirits, or even biblical angels – to prevent them from reaching the surface. Additionally, the player can also recruit these demons as allies to use them against enemies, as well as fusing them together. More on that later, though – for now, the story.

Over time, various conspicuous events start occurring that make Flynn and the other new Samurai start to suspect that there might be more to the land of Mikado than meets the eye, so they head deeper down into Naraku to investigate, having been granted permission to proceed down to the "Unclean Ones' country" by Mikado's elite. Eventually, they come to a gate guarded by the Minotaur, who tries to stop them from passing – I will be blunt, on your first attempt, he will kill you.

This fight does an amazing job of establishing the core gameplay loop that makes the best of the SMT series work so well, an aspect IV handles excellently. When you first try to battle him, you'll likely be horribly unprepared and die a painful death – but, you'll also discover that he's weak to ice attacks. SMT IV, like Nocturne before it, uses the Press Turn battle system; basically, how it works is that you have a certain amount of turns your party can use before your enemy gets to act, but hitting an elemental weakness or fulfilling certain other conditions only uses half a turn.

This combat system, put simply, is pure perfection. Thanks to this, you won't be able to just get by with a high level number, you have to really THINK about what the best party to use for a particular area or boss fight is. You might be able to abuse this system to get more turns, but so can your enemy, so entering a fight with the wrong demons is effectively a death sentence. This turns every boss fight into a puzzle of sorts, where you have to carefully construct the perfect set of demons to defeat your enemy after learning their weaknesses and attack patterns, and the Minotaur is the first boss that really tests your ability to do this.

This is also where that fusion mechanic I mentioned earlier comes into play; at any time, you can fuse two of your demons together to create a new, stronger demon, which comes equipped with some of the skills of the demons you used to fuse it. Once you get good at using this mechanic, it allows you to have considerably greater control over the skills and abilities of your demons, making the puzzle of trying to create the ideal party to beat a tough boss all the more engaging. In case you were wondering, yes, the fusion system was present in SMT 1, which I reviewed a few issues ago, but it wasn't mentioned both for the sake of page space and because the mechanic is much better in IV. Here, you have full control over which skills get transferred to the new demon, and the game also introduces Special Fusions, certain demons which can only be acquired by fusing together two or more pre-determined demons.

Anyway, enough gushing about the gameplay, back to gushing about the story. Once the Minotaur is defeated, you continue going deeper into Naraku, but things seem... different, somehow. Past the gate he was guarding, the surroundings seem much more modern, and Naraku starts to feel less like a cave and more like an old, abandoned building. There's been instances of modern or futuristic technology before this, like the arm gauntlets the Samurai wear that allow them to control demons, but nothing on this level. Once you go further down, though, the reason for this bizarre shift makes itself clear, as you're treated to a view of a dilapidated, modern-day Tokyo, from a window at the top of the Tower of Naraku.

To be honest, I wasn't sure if I should include a mention of this reveal or not. I knew about it going in, and it was still a great moment, but I do want to avoid spoilers for my reviews... that being said, it's fairly heavily foreshadowed, so it's not much of a spoiler, and Tokyo as a setting works so amazingly well that I'd be doing the game a disservice if I didn't at least mention it. Plus, trust me, there's still a lot about the game's setting you don't know; even at this point, there's still a lot of unanswered questions.

Anyway, Tokyo in this game is great for two reasons; one, the atmosphere. As you'd expect, it feels completely different to anything from before this point, the soundtrack in particular doing an amazing job at conveying the whole vibe of Tokyo as a setting. Before this, the music has all been fairly standard fantasy RPG stuff, but the moment you enter Tokyo, it instantly shifts to this weird, dark synth-rock sound that perfectly manages to sell the vibe of every area you visit.

The other thing that makes Tokyo work so perfectly is the exploration. Up until this point, the game has been entirely linear, it's all very "go to this place, do this battle, watch this story event play out"; not to say this is a bad thing, but it makes the descent into Tokyo all the more impactful. Here, there are a lot of points where you're left to just wander and discover the next story objective for yourself, with lots of optional side content along the way to get distracted by. To be honest, Tokyo in this game is a confusing maze that often makes barely any sense... and I love it for exactly that reason.

Getting lost in a bizarre, unfamiliar world you don't understand, desperately trying to figure out where you're meant to go next, all while lots of other random nonsense is happening all around you really does a great job of placing you in the main character's shoes. He's completely lost in an alien world he has no understanding of, why should he know where anything is? Additionally, being forced to just wander about and take in the atmosphere does a great job of further characterizing Tokyo as a setting; if you were able to just blitz through it and ignore everything except the next linear story objective, the setting wouldn't feel nearly as immersive. The confusing map isn't for everyone, but I love it personally, and I'd much rather this than have Tokyo turn into a glorified menu.

From this point onwards, the story also becomes much less linear. Like in the first game, there are three main alignments, Law, Neutral and Chaos, all of which the player can choose to side with. Unlike in that game, though, SMT IV feels much more heavily weighted towards the Neutral alignment; here, Law and Chaos are much worse options than in other games in the series, and Neutral is a much better one, which does remove a lot of the story's nuance... but, I'll be honest, I don't care. The story in this game is still absolutely phenomenal, no matter which route you choose, it's pure perfection from start to finish. Overall, Shin Megami Tensei IV is an absolutely incredible game; if any of what I've said here interests you even slightly, go play it at once. Everything here is just perfect – the gameplay, story, atmosphere, even the demon designs, it all just clicks. It's a 10 out of 10 game, easily.

Final Score

Gameplay - 10
Story - 10
Look/Sound - 10

10

DONKEY KONG
(NES)

Someone asked me to write a review of NES Donkey Kong in this for the funny, while judging the game (a port of an arcade game from 1981) by modern gaming standards. I agreed that that sounded hilarious, so here we are. Don't worry, a proper Easy Emulation segment is up next.

Released first in 1981, the NES port I'm reviewing here coming later (1983 in Japan and 1986 everywhere else), Donkey Kong is a classic arcade game that, for its time, was a revolutionary success... that doesn't mean it's anything special nowadays, though. In Donkey Kong, you play as ~~Mario~~ I mean, Jumpman, and need to climb up through three unique levels (four in the arcade version, the second level was cut for the NES port due to a lack of storage space) in order to rescue Pauline from the clutches of giant ape Donkey Kong.

The process of doing this is... eh, it's alright. Jumpman's movement is horrifically slow, and the temporary hammer powerup that allows you to destroy barrels and fireballs in the first and last levels prevents you from moving upwards, so the combination of these two factors means a lot of your time is spent waiting, either for Jumpman to walk to where you want him to or for the hammer powerup to end. That aside, though, there's a generally solid sense of control over Jumpman, and with occasional exceptions, obstacles are well-telegraphed, so when you die in this game, it's generally your fault.

But what happens once you beat the game? ...It starts over. The objective in Donkey Kong isn't actually to "finish" it, it's to replay the same three levels over and over again until you run out of lives, resulting in a game over, each time aiming for a higher score than the last. To be honest, it's quite boring and repetitive, but if you're looking for a brief time-waster to kill 15 or 20 minutes, it's actually not bad. The inclusion of multiple distinct levels and introduction of platforming elements to gaming as a whole was certainly impressive for its time, but curiosity aside, there's really no reason to go back to this game now. It's not bad, just a bit mediocre.

Final Score

Gameplay - 5

Story - 5

Look/Sound - 5

5

クロノアヒーローズ

KLONOA HEROES

☆ THE LEGENDARY STAR MEDAL ☆

Klonoa Heroes is an action-RPG spinoff of the Klonoa series, released exclusively in Japan for the Gameboy Advance in December of 2002, and as of this issue's release, is the last new game in the series, remakes not included. Given that it can be assumed this is the last game Klonoa will ever get, is it a fitting send-off for the series?

Short answer, yes. Klonoa Heroes takes place from a top down perspective, having the player navigate through various different levels and battle enemies along the way, with a battle system that's honestly fairly straightforward. You only have one attack button, can hold it for a charged attack, and the only other things you can do in gameplay are use items, using the select button to cycle through your items and the R button to use them, and your character's unique screen-clearing Special Move. Where the gameplay shines, though, is in its customization.

You start the game with just one character, Klonoa, but later on you can also unlock Gantz and Pango to play as, with each one having their own unique playstyle. Each character has five different weapons you can equip for them, unlocked over the course of the game, each of which can drastically change up how the character plays. It's not perfect, Pango feels less like he has "five unique weapons" and more like he just gets five variations on the same singular weapon, but Klonoa and Gantz both have a high degree of customization in how they work. This is aided by the leveling system; instead of a level up simply raising all your stats, it gives you one stat point you can put into either attack, special, defence or agility, with different pieces of equipment having different maximum amounts you can put into these stats. At any time, you can rearrange how a character's stat points are distributed, allowing you to play around with different builds and incentivizing the player to experiment and find the playstyle that truly suits them. The customization in this game is great fun, I love it.

That's not to say the moment-to-moment gameplay isn't fun too; in particular, I like the way it forces you to think fast with using items instead of being able to use them from the pause menu, and I enjoy the risk/reward element of how levelling up fully heals you, forcing you to decide between using an item to restore your health and pushing on in the hope that you'll be able to level up before you die, but the customization is where the gameplay is at its best.

Before I go over the story, I want to talk about the game's art direction for a bit. You might recall me saying in my Dream Champ Tournament review that I absolutely adored the direction that game's art style went in, which is why I was so happy to see Heroes turning that whole aesthetic up to 11. By virtue of being an RPG, Yoshihiko Arai's new art style is given much more of a chance to truly shine here, and for me personally, playing this game was as much about getting to appreciate the character art as it was about the gameplay or story. I know not everyone will enjoy it as much as I do, it's very much a case of me personally just being a huge fan of the art direction, but if you liked the art style present in Dream Champ Tournament, I have no doubt you'll love this game.

The story is excellent, too. It's by far the most detailed story we've ever gotten for a Klonoa game, and there are countless tiny moments of great character writing that do an excellent job of characterizing everyone present in this game. Knowing this is the last time these characters will ever be seen makes it feel oddly bittersweet, though, and somehow, it feels like the developers also knew this too; you can tell from the writing that everyone involved loves these characters, and the whole game has this air of "right, we'll never get to make a game about these characters again, let's put everything we've got into this one". Admittedly, though, a large part of the story's appeal is how it functions as a kind of tribute to everything the Klonoa series has been up until this point, being a tiny bit basic otherwise, so I don't think it'd hit quite as hard for someone not already familiar with the series.

Overall, Klonoa Heroes is an incredible game, that I believe is perfectly positioned as the last in its franchise. I don't think someone who's not already a Klonoa fan would get as much out of it, due to its nature as a kind of "last hurrah" for the series, but it's still one I absolutely love, and one of my favourite games I've ever played. I know I said that earlier about SMT 4 as well, but I promise I'm not exaggerating, this issue is just stacked with incredible games.

Final Score

Gameplay - 9

Story - 8

Look/Sound - 10

9

POCKET RUMBLE

Pocket Rumble, released for PC in 2016 and later on the Switch in 2018, is a fighting game aiming to be a simple, beginner-friendly alternative to the more complex entries in the genre.

Usually, I hate these kinds of games, and I think these days there's far too many of them despite the fact that every developer who makes one acts as if they're doing something new and revolutionary we've never seen before, but I think Pocket Rumble is one of the better ones. The controls are simple, you have two attack buttons, A and B for light and heavy, and can walk, dash, and jump. That's it.

Ok, that's not entirely true. By holding the down button as well as either back or forwards, and pressing one of your attack buttons, you can use a special move, with each character having exactly four in their moveset. Additionally, there's also a unique action they can take by pressing A and B at the same time, which may or may not count as a fifth special move depending on your definition, but either way, you don't have a lot to work with here.

So far, this game might sound extremely boring and simplistic, but what saves it is the sheer creativity found in its characters' movesets. There might only be eight to choose from, but there's not a single character here that plays like any other, and every single one has something to help them stand out. The universal mechanics in this game might be fairly simple, but the individual characters are anything but, and this fact single-handedly makes the game so much more enjoyable. Since there's only eight, I think the best way to get this across is to give a brief overview of what each character does, so you can see what I mean.

Tenchi, the main character, is fairly simple, having a basic projectile and a few other attacks, and a metre that, when it fills up, allows him to shoot a bigger projectile. He's one of only two characters I don't like. Naomi is a fast, aggressive rushdown character, who can charge up her metre to gain stronger versions of her special attacks. Keiko has a pet cat that can turn into an eldrich abomination, and her moveset revolves around controlling both her and the cat at the same time. Hector loses health when he uses special moves, and sometimes has to press a button to recover the health he loses from doing this... he's the other one I don't like.

Quinn can turn into a werewolf once per round, switching him over to an entirely different, much stronger moveset for a brief period. Parker can set an orb on the stage, and when he sets a second one, a bolt of lightning will be fired between the two orbs, stunning the opponent if they get caught in it. Subject 11... I'll be honest, I don't remember what Subject 11 does, and June, my personal favourite character, sets a stationary clone of herself on the stage whenever she uses a special move, and can "call" that clone at any time to have it use the same special move before disappearing.

So many other "accessible" fighting games like Pocket Rumble fall into the trap of making individual characters far too simplistic and same-y, but what this game proves is that, just because your universal mechanics are simplistic by design, doesn't mean your characters have to be too. Admittedly, it still wouldn't be my favourite game in the genre due to how slow the movement is if you're playing as anyone other than Naomi or Quinn, but I can definitely still enjoy it from time to time, and it's one of the best fighting games that specifically aims to be beginner-friendly I've ever played.

Overall, Pocket Rumble is a solidly above-average fighting game, and while it might not be my favourite, I can still definitely respect it for what it is. If regular fighting games are too difficult for you, I'd recommend giving this one a look, it might change your perspective on the genre.

Final Score

Gameplay - 7

Story - none

Look/Sound - 6

7

Wii™

The Nintendo Wii, released in 2006, represented a shift in Nintendo's strategy for their consoles. Rather than directly competing with the PS3 and Xbox 360, they instead chose to focus less on raw processing power and more on targeting a new, more casual market. The approach paid off, making the Wii the best selling console of its generation and Nintendo's current second-best selling console behind the Switch, but it also led to the console having a very specific type of library, making it an interesting one to talk about.

A big part of Nintendo's strategy for appealing to the casual market was the Wii's new motion controls, which could detect a limited degree of motion in the Wii Remote and have games respond accordingly. Aside from being a new and innovative control method (and resulting in a few broken TVs), this was mainly done to draw in those new, casual players. If you're the type who doesn't play many games, "use the left stick to turn in Mario Kart" is going to naturally be a lot less intuitive than "tilt the Wii Remote like a steering wheel", but the motion controls also influenced the types of games that would be published for the Wii, best seen in Wii Sports.

Bundled with the console, Wii Sports is a collection of five smaller, sport-themed minigames, and is basically the archetypal Wii game. One thing with motion controls is that, since they were fairly limited in practice, the games that used them heavily were very simple as a result. The limitations worked in the console's favour, though, forcing the motion-controlled games to not be too complicated; in Wii Tennis, you just swing the Wii Remote whenever necessary to hit the ball, in Wii Golf you just swing it at the right speed and angle, etc. There was the Wii Motion Plus accessory, which allowed the remote to pick up on more precise movements, but Wii Sports: Resort and The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword, both excellent games, were the only two significant releases to fully take advantage of the technology, so it unfortunately wasn't that relevant.

Unfortunately, the Wii's heavy emphasis on the casual and family markets also meant its playerbase was, well, a bit more clueless than average. Shovelware is a term that refers to cheaply-made slop made exclusively to make quick and easy money, and the Wii was absolutely full of it. Wii shovelware had everything, from dodgy minigame collections attempting to invoke Wii Sports with names like "15 ultra family funfair games" to the more bizarre ones like the infamous Ninja Breadman seen above, and the only thing that united them all was their shockingly poor quality and budget consisting of a half-eaten slice of cheese and a strange green blob one of the developers found in the shed.

If you're a child getting these games as birthday presents from clueless but well-meaning relatives, they're a disaster, but if you're trying to find good games on the Wii for yourself, you'll spot these from a mile away, so they're unlikely to seriously damage anyone's experience with the console now. And the Wii's multiplayer library had a lot of classics too, with games like Wii Party, Go Vacation and the previously mentioned Wii Sports: Resort taking the Wii's design philosophy of fun, approachable multiplayer games and use it to create something genuinely really enjoyable.

And despite how I've characterized the Wii so far, there are exceptions to the rule as well, with games like Zelda: Twilight Princess, Xenoblade Chronicles and Fire Emblem: Radiant Dawn being very good at providing a more in-depth experience for people who want more then just casual fun. Overall, the Wii is a console I'm very fond of, and with its emphasis on offline multiplayer and relative lack of online features compared to the PS3 and Xbox 360, it feels to me like the last of the "classic" consoles in a way. It sounds cliché by this point, but it really was the last major console where you could just buy a game, put the disc in and have that be it; no extra paid DLC, no having to pay for a subscription service to access crucial online features the game is built around, and no paying €4.99 for 500 Premium BattleCoins or whatever nonsense they can come up with. Motion-controlled gimmicks aside, the Wii was a relic of a previous era compared to the other consoles of its generation, and I think there's value in that. Oh, and Mario Galaxy and Super Smash Bros: Brawl are both very good. There was no convenient part in this article for me to bring them up in otherwise, but they're great games, I really like them, and Brawl especially is probably my favourite game for the Wii aside from Wii Sports: Resort.

Games Don't Have To Be Boring To Be Art

For decades now, there's been a consistent debate over if video games can be considered a form of art or not. My personal belief is that they very obviously can be, and it's a bit silly to act as if they can't, but chances are if you care enough to read an amateur magazine where I do

nothing but review and talk about games, you probably agree, so I don't want to spend much time arguing that perspective. Instead, I want to talk about a particular theme I've noticed among the people who try to provide reasons for why games can be art that kind of annoys me, and go over why I think it's a false line of reasoning, as much as I might agree with the conclusion.

But first, a quick definition; to me, "art" is anything created, either by an individual or a group of people, simply because they wanted it to exist, and without any external motivation. It doesn't exist to line shareholders' pockets, or to lazily push a message in order to bring about its creator's desired societal change, art simply is. That's not to say it's inherently purposeless, art can seek to be any number of things, just that its primary reason for existing is internally motivated, as opposed to being a mere stepping stone towards a broader goal. I also don't want to imply that artists can't or shouldn't seek to make money off their art, there's nothing wrong with this, just that I don't see art with profit as its only reason to exist as real art at all.

Regardless, I'm establishing this for two purposes: one, to disqualify forgettable cash-grab slop like the yearly Fifa releases or the numerous dime-a-dozen "satisfying" mobile games from being counted as "art", and two, to show that there's really no logical reason for games to inherently "not count" as a form of art. Not all games are art in practice, but this also goes for other mediums too; I think it's silly to equate Okami with Fifa as proof games "aren't real art", for the same reason anyone can see it's silly to equate The Godfather with Friday the 13th, Part 8: Jason Takes Manhattan and use that as "proof" that cinema isn't a real art form either. Every art form has its fair share of slop, and games are no different, but this doesn't make the truly great games that do exist any less valuable.

With that said, note the example I used for a game I consider true art, Okami. Okami is a beautiful game, but it's also engaging, enjoyable to play, and doesn't take itself too seriously; put simply, it's fun. All too often, people who want to try and defend the idea that games are a valid form of art will try and use incredibly

questionable examples to prove their point, typically choosing cutscene-heavy movie-games like The Last of Us or dark, moody walking simulators like Edith Finch for how "deep" and "meaningful" they supposedly are. In practice, all this does is create an artificial distinction between "art games", games which are "real art" and have "meaning" and all that jazz while also being boring and tedious to actually play, and "toy games", games which are undeserving of being called true art, but have the unique benefit of also being fun and not dreary slogs that need to be 100% serious 100% of the time. Art games have minimal gameplay, toy games are made to be fun to play. Art games have stories about the deep, personal emotional struggles of one or two people without much personality, toy games either don't have stories at all or revolve around a large cast of fun and entertaining characters. And so on, and so forth.

I... utterly despise this distinction. I think it's made with good intentions, by people who want to prove to the world that games can be "taken seriously" or whatever else, but I don't think in the pursuit of making something "art" you need to discard any and all aspects that make games fun. For that matter, I think trying to use these types of games specifically as examples inadvertently downplays the value the medium can have; if your best example of games as a form of art is The Last of Us, a game which very clearly would rather be a movie or a TV show instead, then what does that say about games as a medium? With this in mind, I honestly think a great example of games as art is... Pizza Tower. Yes, I'm serious, hear me out.

Pizza Tower is not a game anyone is going to analyze with any serious depth. It's an inherently silly, honestly kind of stupid game about a very angry man who decides to beat a floating pizza head to death because it began planning to vaporize his restaurant with a ray gun. But it's also an intense labour of love (not to mention extremely fun to play), worked on primarily by just one man for five years, and if you play it for any length of time, this passion becomes immensely obvious. Aside from the fact that generally, artistic passion likes to make itself obvious when it's there, do you really think someone purely out to make money would spend 5 years making Pizza Tower? I'm sick and tired of people acting as if games need to do away with fun in order to be a "real art form" when Okami, Pizza Tower, and in my opinion, every single game I've reviewed in this issue, all exist as proof that this couldn't be further from the truth.

What's Next?

Mario Kart: World is an upcoming entry in the Mario Kart series, the first proper new one since 2014's Mario Kart 8, set to be released as a launch title for the upcoming Switch 2. A physical copy is set to cost an absurd €90, but given that I already talked about the Switch 2's game prices in last month's Yap Trap segment, I'd rather just skip over that and get right into talking about the game itself.

The main selling point of Mario Kart: World is its scale. The amount of racers in a race is doubled from the standard 12 to 24, and the game is set to have at least 50 playable characters, by far the most we've seen in any Mario Kart game before. Now, granted, many of these are just regular enemies from the series, like Goombas, Hammer Bros, and... fish skeletons, which might make some people accuse the roster of having unnecessary padding, but I personally quite like regular Mario enemies, so I don't mind. Also, if you can't appreciate a fish skeleton on a motorbike, I just think you're no fun. You can even play as those silly blue penguins!

Wonderful cast of characters aside, the probably more significant addition is that the tracks are now all interconnected in a large, open world, allowing players to seamlessly drive between each of them during Grand Prix mode. This is a mechanic which, depending on how the routes that take you between tracks are designed, has the potential to either be really fun or absolutely terrible, but I'll be honest, I think I care more about the playable fish skeleton either way. The open world setup interests me, but also, have you considered: fish skeleton?