

## Using the Almighty Puzzle to Defeat the Dragons

Halloween 2014 is the day I'll never forget; the day I was dragged into the world of *Puzzle & Dragons*.

I was at a party; they were just finishing and decided to call it a night. I was at the sofa when a girl came up to me and asked if I wanted to try a phone game. "Oh, it's called Puzzle & Dragons. It's a pretty fun game, you should try it," she told me. I was bored at the time, so I went with it; she told me brief things about the game as I downloaded it and went through the tutorial.

Once I was home, I decided to look up what the game is about. The amount of content overwhelmed me – there were so many monsters! And how do these mechanics work? Nevertheless, I decided to take my time and learn all about the game.

Fast forward 1000+ days later: I find myself writing a review of this game I have a love-hate relationship with. I love how the mechanics fit together seamlessly, yet hate how the random number generator (RNG) that screws me over from time to time. Yet, I still play this game.

*Puzzle & Dragons* (or PAD, as many players call it) is a popular mobile puzzle-based video game developed by Gungho Online Entertainment. Originally released in Japan on February 2012, its commercial success led to its release in North America on November 2012. PAD combines puzzle elements from other mobile games (i.e. *Bejeweled*) with monster RPG (role-playing game) elements found in games such as *Pokemon*. All this makes a simple yet interactive premise: you lead a team of monsters through numerous dungeons, where you fight various enemies using the power of "elemental orbs" as you progress. The endgame of it all? To defeat the almighty "legendary dragon".

"But how do you beat these enemies?" you ask. Check this out:



Bam. This is what you see upon entering a dungeon: enemies and HUD information on top, while your team layout and a huge checkered board filled with various colored orbs takes up the bottom half. You start by picking up any orb (by holding it with your finger), and slide it around the board as you make same-color orb matches (3+ orbs). Let it go, and watch the magic unfold: every match sequentially disappears as they turn into numbers on your team layout. The more matches (or combos) you make, the bigger the numbers grow; your team then takes the numbers and blasts them into the enemy.

While the orb movement mechanic is simple, it also encourages players to strategize their combos. Compared to other games where your orb movement is severely limited (looking at you *Candy Crush*); here you have four seconds move the orb as much as you want (potentially more in given circumstances). As you progress through the game, you'll encounter complex mechanics such as combo thresholds, forced orb conversions, and board blinds – on top of tougher enemies and dungeon layouts.

Outside of dungeon gameplay, you can manage your monster selection and teams. This is where the RPG element kicks in; monsters can be obtained primarily through dungeon drops (enemies

can drop eggs of themselves on defeat), and various egg machines. From there, you can use enhance fodder to level and evolve them to tackle higher tier dungeons. This RPG aspect adds depth to the puzzling experience; you're not only clearing dungeons to get whatever fodder you need, but also formulating different teams so you can try them out in other dungeons. Although the "grind" to make perfect teams isn't a new concept for seasoned RPG players, it nonetheless provides a whole set of strategies that separates PAD from other RPG games.



*When someone takes farming too far*

Every mobile game has its premium currency; for PAD, it's the almighty rainbow-colored magic stone. Obtained through first-time dungeon clears and special biweekly events (or through real-life currency if you're a sucker like me), it's most common use is as currency for the Rare Egg Machine (REM). For five stones apiece, you get a chance to pull the dragon-shaped slot machine and get a rare monster (not obtainable through dungeons). Maybe you'll get a powerful monster! *Maybe you'll get a shitty silver egg-tier monster and regret everything.*

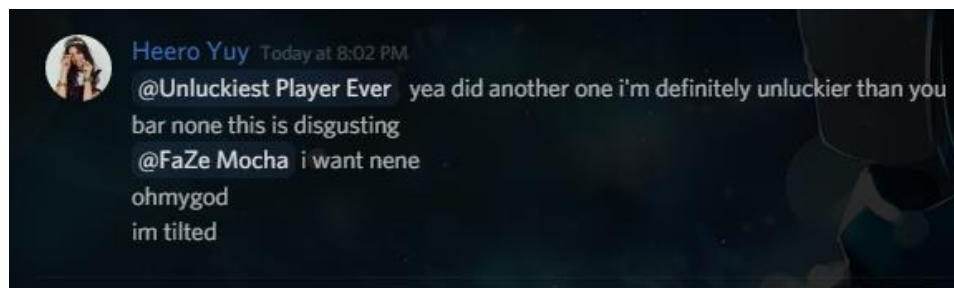


*Yog-Sothoth: a monster many players dream of getting, but only those with the luck (and money) to be able to get.*



Interestingly, the REM is one aspect that defines the game; it is why most people refer to as a “gacha game”. For those who don’t know: gacha refers to “gachapon”; small toy vending machines where you insert a coin, twist the dial, and a toy (inside a capsule) pops out of the slot. The gachapon was conceptualized by entrepreneur Ryuzo Shigeta in the 1960s; he took the coin vending machine concept and adapted it so it spits out goods in plastic capsules. The idea itself proved to be a huge success; it even led to the formation of Bandai, a popular Japanese-based toy manufacturer. Today, its popularity has also led to its foray of the gaming world; some mobile games have even incorporated “gacha” elements as part of their gameplay.

As someone who invested too much time and money into the game, I can relate with all those who wanted a certain monster for the teams, only to be hit with crushing disappointment when a silver egg pops out of the egg machine. While each monster rarity affects pull rates, in the end it’s all RNG; it could take a few rolls, or perhaps hundreds of stones’ worth to get something you need. Heck, an older player can spend \$300+ worth of stones and not get a chase monster, while someone who just installed the game can get said monster on his first try.



You could draw comparisons to other “freemium” games where a “pay to get X” component exists – here, the best monsters in the game come from the REM. However, you don’t *need* the best monsters to beat most of the content; a reasonably developed box with completely free rolls is usually enough to tackle end-game content. Additionally, there are some farmable monsters that can be as powerful as their REM-only counterparts – while they are few in between, using them to tackle end-game content is perfectly viable. After all, the joy of playing PAD is that game progression is accessible by everyone, yet their experiences and boxes will be different from others.



*1 team is 1/2 farmable, the other is REM only and optimized for the dungeon. Which one is which?*

In all, *Puzzle & Dragons* combines both mobile puzzling elements and RPG ideas to create an interesting take on a mobile RPG game. It has something for both casual and hardcore players alike; some may play it for fun, while others would spend all day farming end-game dungeons with teams he spent his life savings on. Even though I'm one of those hardcore players, I still enjoy messing around with team setups whenever I'm bored. And there's always that tense moment when you pull the REM and you think to yourself, "whatamigonnaget?" – it may look like an in-game lottery, for some of us players it could be the one thing we depend on for a better box.