

# **GAME BOY ESSENTIALS VOLUME II**

*by Pierre-Luc Gagné*

Game Boy Essentials Volume II  
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[gameboyessentials.com](http://gameboyessentials.com)

Second Edition

This book is set in Adobe Caslon Pro, with Inconsolata for monospaced segments, and Avenir Next for headings. It also uses fonts from *Super Mario Land* and *Pokémon* for flourishes.

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*To Annie, for never giving up on me. Even when I'm talking about Game Boy games and you're trying to sleep.*

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# Introduction

This book is the second volume of Game Boy Essentials, an attempt to understand the Game Boy library through its essential titles, good or bad. I have always looked forward to self-publishing this second book more than the first one, even before I started the project.

You see, I think anybody can write one book. I honestly believe that anyone who sets their mind to it can write something and use the tools available for free to self-publish. What is tough is publishing a second book; the novelty of saying you're writing a book is gone. It took me much longer than I planned to write the twelve articles you see in this book. I had fully expected my excitement to recede. I knew, even before I started writing the first volume, that the second one would be the difficult achievement.

Do not mistake me; I am ultimately very happy with the written words in this book. I believe the twelve articles you hold in your hands are my best articles so far. I just had a harder time finding the motivation to write them. One thing was still exciting and required little motivation, however: typesetting.

When you typeset a book, you end up discovering if you like doing it. And most people don't like paying attention to what needs to happen to create a book. I discovered I loved it. Not necessarily that I was any good at it, but that I had a lot of fun stressing all the little minutiae that goes into making the physical thing that is a book. What book size do you feel works best with your content? What font do you use? What about line height? Etc.

Typesetting my first book was also a mess. Because I wanted the process to be straightforward, my first book was made us-

ing Apple's Pages. It speaks to the power of this application that I was able to make it using its limited tool set. Unfortunately, the amount of time and effort it took to manually place every image and arrange every paragraph was simply too time-consuming to joyfully repeat for my second book. Pages also has some severe functionality gaps with page layout. My improved skills in programming came to my rescue. Last year, I had switched the management of my website to Jekyll. Gameboyessentials.com was previously hand-crafted, with more and more automated shell scripts written by me over time to automate tasks until it became unwieldy. Jekyll changed that for the better. It's a wonderful static site generator that I was able to mould into making my idiosyncratic website. It's extremely popular and well documented, so I was quickly able to find solutions to all my problems. I didn't need any strange hack, I simply used its Collections feature to code all the details I wanted. Once that project was completed, and I could manage my site with ease, I was itching for more coding challenges. That's when I looked at my book.

Before I even dabbled in Jekyll, I had tried automating the typesetting of my book with ConTeXt, a variant of TeX focused on separating your styling from your text. Unfortunately, ConTeXt failed me. I am not a professional programmer. Stack Overflow taught me everything I know. ConTeXt had so little documentation that I had to abandon my endeavour; I simply could not find answers to very basic questions. That's when I turned to Pages and ended up with the first edition of my first book. I luckily decided to give the TeX family a second chance once my website was updated, a couple of months later. Using Jekyll made me realize that my problem with ConTeXt was with its anemic documentation. So I tried building my book with LaTeX, the most popular flavour of TeX. If you're an academic outside the humanities, you're bound to know what LaTeX is. If not, it's a typeset-

ting system that works using plain text with markup to style your finished document. It's code. Most research papers who need to show mathematical equations are built using LaTeX because of its foolproof nature. Look at this example of my book's legal notice page.

```
\thispagestyle{empty}
\mbox
\vfill
\begin{center}
\setstretch{1}
\fontsize{10pt}{12pt}\selectfont
```

This short example allows the page to be bottom-aligned. Using a system based on such markup, I was able to convert my website's HTML into LaTeX using a mixture of Ruby and Bash scripts. I would look for specific HTML tags for my images, my chapter titles and so forth and convert them into the corresponding LaTeX markup. I quickly learned that you're not supposed to do that in a professional setting with other people's HTML. But since every line was written by me, I had no qualm about parsing my own HTML. The final LaTeX code might be messy and weird, but it didn't matter; the final PDF looked like what I wanted. It took a while to code for every possible permutation on my website, but it was worth it. I finally switched to XeLaTeX since it allowed me to use modern font files. This book is actually the second book I've made using my Jekyll, Bash, Ruby and XeLaTeX workflow: my initial project involved redoing the first volume, which features my first twelve articles. I stealthily republished it in a fancy second edition. The text is lightly edited, and if you don't pay too much attention you won't see the typesetting differences. But I do.

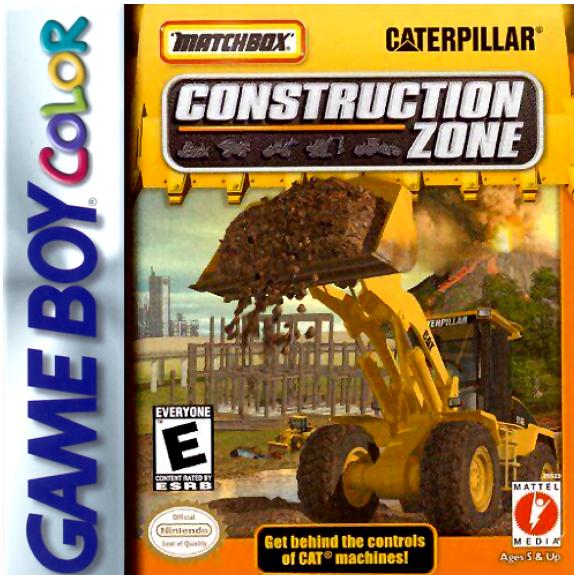
I seem to be forgetting, dear reader, that you're not here for bookmaking nerdery, but rather for Game Boy analysis. Fortunately, the rest of this book is all about that. The

twelve following articles cover a fascinating tranche of video games, representing a large swath of what the Game Boy represented.

Enjoy.

# Matchbox Caterpillar Construction Zone

- North American release in January 2000
- European release in 2000
- Never released in Japan
- Published by Mattel Media
- Developed by Realtime Associates



Yes, I'm talking about a machinery driving game.

# Honk! Honk!



The Game Boy was going through a frenzy of popularity in 2000. What do I mean by a frenzy? People were buying a large number of games for the system, making it viable to develop more games for the system. Any type of game could find an audience.

During the continuing success of *Pokémon* and after the release of the Game Boy Color, it was a good deal for a developer to grab a franchise, make a Game Boy game with Game Boy Color support (a black cartridge) and just see what sticks. To me the best example of this era of 1999–2000 Game Boy Color games is best represented by *Matchbox Caterpillar Construction Zone*. Why? Because I friggin' bought the game at retail with hard-earned teenager money, that's why! For what reason did I buy this game? I still don't know to this day. But I'm familiar with it and so I can talk about it. It's not the only game you could use to represent this era but for me the boomtown mentality of 1999–2000 on Game Boy is best portrayed by *Matchbox Caterpillar Construction Zone*.

## Humble Roots

*Construction Zone* was originally a PC game. A kids game about driving large machinery, it came with a set of controls you could stick on top of your keyboard to pretend you were in a big truck, or a big bulldozer, or whatever!

The joystick really defines what these types of games hoped to achieve. It looks good in the ad, and above all it's meant to be dead simple to set up for kids. The controller mechanically connects to your computer keyboard, so movements on



the controller move levers that push keyboard buttons. No need to install drivers or mess with DLLs to configure this Windows 95 peripheral! The whole project feels more like a toy than proper software. Makes sense when the game has the name Matchbox in the title.



So you had this *PC toy* coming out and somehow it made financial sense to have a Game Boy version come out as well. I find it fascinating that nine people are credited with making a goddamn construction simulator on Game Boy. Who are these people? What do they think of their game? I can't help but wonder: How much time did they spend making this game? Some of those credits are for executive producers, sure, but the game had three programmers and a sound person. They probably worked on this project for months. As an aside, some of the personnel on this game also worked on *Heroes of Might & Magic* on Game Boy Color. I guess assembly programmers versed in Game Boy minutia were not around every corner.

# The Down Low

There is not a lot to say about *Matchbox Caterpillar Construction Zone*. You can't lose, you can't get screwed, you just have to perform the very simple actions the game requires and that's it. You could expect a sandbox where you get to do whatever you want with the big machinery but the game is frustratingly story-driven. There's no way to cause any fun mayhem. You just follow the steps as they are presented by the game. One thing that caught my eye is how little text there is. Since this is ostensibly a game for kids, you'd expect a healthy dose of tutorials. This is not the case. The game uses the very ingenious device of a little foreman simply pointing you in the right direction when you've finished a task.



Why go to all the trouble of animating this little character when a text field would have been much simpler? I think it's a case of building something without text so you don't have to translate it later. I found it interesting. It gives the game personality and it's fun to see the little foreman disapprove when you do the wrong thing. It shows how cheapo releases can still show some amount of effort and ingenuity.

In terms of mistakes and missed opportunities I think the game suffers the most from its ginormous maps. You often get lost and with the complicated tank controls it's hard to move around. You should have tank controls to make you feel like you're operating very big machines but these controls



are jerky so you never feel like you're driving a big vehicle. It would have been better if you had a control scheme based on large archs to maneuver the machines around tight corners and smaller areas. To top it off they maybe could have included an HP meter to limit the number of times you could drive into stuff. I feel like that's probably the main concern when operating a bulldozer; don't bump into things. Here your main concern is not to get lost on the way to the fourth rock you need to move.

## Realtime Associates, Inc.



Ultimately, *Matchbox Caterpillar Construction Zone* is terribly unimportant. The company's own website lists the game under the wrong name, for chrissake. Realtime Associates' history is interesting though: they were created out of a bunch

of Intellivision developers and made the NES port of *Maniac Mansion* and *Bug!* for the Sega Saturn, along with a dizzying number of licensed games. Go read more about their history on their About Page. To me, they'll always be the developer of *Out of Gas* for Game Boy, which I'll get to in due time.

## Conclusion

I think I've already proven with both *Heroes of Might & Magic* that I'm not scared to highlight really surprising games. *Construction Zone* is such a game. It's easy crap for kids, but it shows that in 1999–2000 there was a market for those games. Compare what was released for Game Boy Color in 2000 with what was released for Game Boy in 1997. See a difference? In 1997, the Game Boy was winding down because nobody cared anymore. In 2000, developers were still trying to reap the spoils of a tsunami that reinvigorated the Game Boy: *Pokémon*. That's why *Matchbox Caterpillar Construction Zone* was made and that's why it's essential. It shows you a gold rush in full swing.



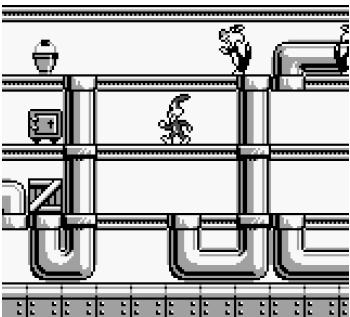
# The Bugs Bunny Crazy Castle

- Japanese release in September 1989
- North American release in March 1990
- Published by Kemco Seika
- Developed by Kemco



He's literally jumping over his enemies on the cover of a game where the main conceit is you can't jump!

# Crazy Stupid Love



I hate Kemco's *Crazy Castle* series. It's not fun or interesting. It also has one of the most complicated release history around. But we must talk about the first game released on Game Boy. Why? Because it's the first Game Boy title to do two things:

1. It is the first *action* title to feature large sprites;
2. It is arguably the first multi-platform release, being made available on NES and Game Boy, albeit with different levels.

It struck a chord with the public and sold more than a million copies. Being an early release certainly helped; it had little competition and featured a very well-known licensed character. A whole bunch of future titles would do the exact same thing, but *The Bugs Bunny Crazy Castle* was the first. For that, and certainly not for its brain-dead gameplay, it's essential.

It was eventually rereleased as a Player's Choice title in 1996 (that's the only way I know it sold more than a million copies) at the nadir of the Game Boy's history, giving the game a second life.

## The Meandering Story of Its Rotating Cast of Franchises

Kemco gets the right to make a Roger Rabbit game for the Famicom Disk System. So far, so good. They create the game and release it in February of 1989, six months after the movie

is released in the US but just two months after the release in Japanese theatres in December of 1988. The timing is so tight it's possible they started developing the game as a blank slate before they had a franchise to put on the game.



Roger Rabbit

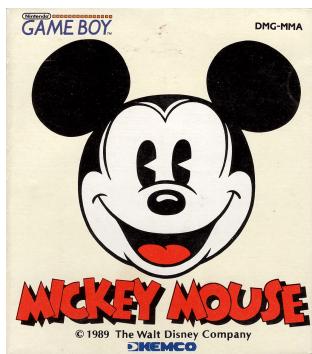


Bugs Bunny

Now comes the time to get your throwaway game to North America. But in North America, Kemco did not hold the video game rights for the *Roger Rabbit* movie. Another game based on *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* was instead released to coincide with its VHS release, a really big event back in the fall of 1989. It's not the same game as the Japanese one: it was published by LJN and developed by Rare of all people! Kemco did release its game in North America, but as *The Bugs Bunny Crazy Castle*. They ported the game to cartridge (from an FDS diskette) and changed the sprites into Looney Tunes characters. How did we end up in this situation?

It's not necessarily a simple answer of LJN having snatched the rights in North America before Kemco could localize their version. It's very possible that Kemco being a Japanese company, they concentrated on getting the game out in Japan without ever really thinking about a worldwide release. It might be possible that Kemco did not think it was worth paying for the rights to a movie out of American theatres, and they did not consider coinciding their game with a VHS release. It might be possible that the movie being a big hit, the price for the rights went up and shut out Kemco. It might

be possible that the game being out, the American rights holder saw the Japanese version and thought it was inappropriate. I don't know. The rights to Roger Rabbit himself are convoluted, to say the least; Spielberg has to this day a veto on anything Roger Rabbit related (the movie version of the character: Roger Rabbit was adapted from a novel), we can only presume at the complicated discussions that left us with the situation we're in with the *Crazy Castle* games.



Kemco seemed to have had the avant-garde idea of releasing a version of their Famicom/NES game for the portable Game Boy. Nobody had done that on Game Boy before. *Tennis & Baseball* by Nintendo were adaptations of old Famicom sports titles. *Hyper Lode Runner*, which came out in Japan a couple of weeks after Kemco's game

was a new version of an old PC title. But a contemporary licensed game, released on Nintendo's two consoles around the same time, that was still new ground. So we have the Japanese release in the fall of 1989 of *Mickey Mouse* for Game Boy. Wait a minute? Wasn't this article about *The Bugs Bunny Crazy Castle*? Where does Mickey Mouse come into play? Kemco did not have the same licence in different regions, so they just changed the licensed characters in their games. See this handy chart:

Japanese Release	North American Release	European Release	Comments
<i>Roger Rabbit</i>	<i>The Bugs Bunny Crazy Castle</i>	Not released	The original FDS version and the NES adaptation.
<i>Mickey Mouse</i>	<i>The Bugs Bunny Crazy Castle</i>	<i>The Bugs Bunny Crazy Castle</i>	The game we are talking about here: it's really a sequel, not a port of the previous game.
<i>Mickey Mouse II</i>	<i>The Bugs Bunny Crazy Castle 2</i>	<i>Hugo or Mickey Mouse</i>	The second Game Boy game, third overall; by the way, who the hell is Hugo?
<i>Mickey Mouse III: Balloon Dreams</i>	<i>Kid Clown in Night Mayor World</i>	Not released	A late NES platformer, only considered in the series because of its Japanese numbering.
<i>Mickey Mouse IV: The Magical Labyrinth</i>	<i>The Real Ghost-busters</i>	<i>Garfield Labyrinth</i>	Back to Game Boy, with every market having a different licence! Oh boy!
<i>Mickey Mouse V: The Magical Stick</i>	<i>Mickey Mouse: Magic Wands!</i>	<i>Mickey Mouse V: Zauberstaeb!</i>	A Game Boy release, it sold a million copies in North America and got rereleased in 1998. It shows how strong the Mickey Mouse brand is.
<i>Let's Go!! Kid: Go! Go! Kid</i>	Not released	Not released	They clearly no longer had the Mickey Mouse licence. It released without any licence attached.
<i>Bugs Bunny: Crazy Castle 3</i>	<i>Bugs Bunny: Crazy Castle 3</i>	<i>Bugs Bunny: Crazy Castle 3</i>	A Game Boy Color enhanced version of <i>Go! Go! Kid</i> ; it renumbered the series in Japan and picked up Bugs Bunny for every market.
<i>Bugs Bunny in Crazy Castle 4</i>	<i>Bugs Bunny in Crazy Castle 4</i>	<i>Bugs Bunny in Crazy Castle 4</i>	A Game Boy Color only release.
<i>Woody Woodpecker in Crazy Castle 5</i>	<i>Woody Wood-pecker in Crazy Castle 5</i>	<i>Woody Wood-pecker in Crazy Castle 5</i>	A GBA game, it seems they lost the Bugs Bunny licence and went with something cheaper. Woody Woodpecker is not a hot licensing opportunity.

So we have a game series that started out as a somewhat hard FDS *Roger Rabbit* cash-in that became an easier series of Game Boy *Mickey Mouse* games in Japan re-skinned as *The Bugs Bunny Crazy Castle* in North America. It's all fitting, considering Bugs and Mickey both appeared in *Roger Rabbit*.



You'd think Kemco would re-skin the *Crazy Castle* games with Bob Hoskins in Australia or something.

## Lode of Crap



The Apple II version

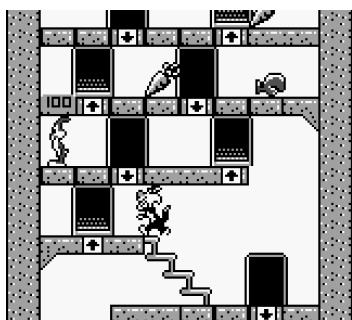
*Roger Rabbit*, and thus the whole *Crazy Castle* series, is basically a ripoff of *Lode Runner*. A game by Douglas E. Smith, *Lode Runner* was released on microcomputers in 1983, and published by Brøderbund. You're a stick figure, running around in a side view labyrinth of platforms and ladders,

with the objective of gathering all the gold strewn around the level to move on. But beware the enemy stick figures that walk around! You have no way of defeating them; your only tool against them are holes you can dig to stop them for a very short time. This allows you to walk over their head and continue along your path. It's a platformer of its time, made well before *Super Mario Bros.* changed everything: you have to get really intimate with its AI mechanics to achieve any kind of success. Play it today and you'll be wishing for a jump button after one level. What is interesting for us is the Hudson Soft port for Famicom released in 1984. It featured different, larger levels with scrolling since the Famicom could smoothly scroll while microcomputers couldn't. It introduced no new concepts to the game, still featuring a character moving across a side view labyrinth in search of gold, digging holes to temporarily stop his enemies. The Family Computer (the Japanese version of the NES) had a dearth of releases for its first two years on the market but was very successful as a console. Nintendo was kind of caught with their pants down. So a game like *Lode Runner*, which in all honesty is not that fun, sold millions of copies in Japan and became a beloved classic even though its kind-of terrible. The best comparison I have is to the first NES *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* game and its revered status here in North America. It's bad, we all know it's bad, but we played it too much **not** to love it. Sometimes love is illogical.

*Roger Rabbit* on FDS is an extension of the concept of *Lode Runner*. You run around for hearts in each level instead of gold, it replaces ladders and tightropes with staircases and pipes, and instead of digging holes to defeat your enemies you push 100-ton weights on them or throw punching gloves. Just like the cartoons! Once hit, enemies disappear for good in a puff of smoke, making *Crazy Castle* much more manageable than *Lode Runner*'s pacifist brand of gameplay. Even with those changes, *Roger Rabbit* on FDS is not



an easy game. It's easier than *Lode Runner*, but it's still a mean game. Japanese audiences would have been accustomed to it though; they had years of *Lode Runner* derivatives under their collective belt in 1989. In North America we saw most of those games but they were never popular. This meant we were collectively not used to this brand of gameplay. So *The Bugs Bunny Crazy Castle* on NES made one big concession: the enemies are slower.



We now get to our game of interest: the Game Boy version. You might be tempted to think it's a straight port with the same levels, but it's not. It's more akin to a sequel. It has the same mechanics (staircases, punching gloves and 100 ton weights) but new levels. The graphics are also

redrawn and are honestly much better looking than on NES. Remember that we have two versions of the game: the Japanese *Mickey Mouse* and the North American version. I've looked carefully and I do not see any difference between the Japanese *Mickey Mouse* and the North American *Bugs Bunny* (except for the whole Mickey Mouse thing, obviously). So

both games are much easier in enemy placement, much simpler in level design than the previous FDS/NES games and that was considered sufficient to please everyone. So the only difference between both Game Boy releases is a simple palette swap, which will become this forsaken series' best remembered characteristic: palette swaps as far as the eye can see!

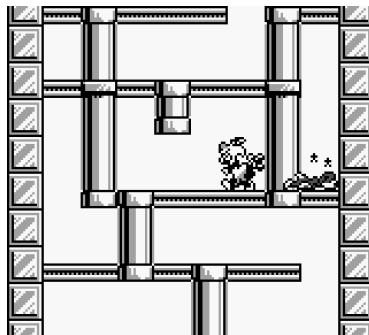
## First With Big Sprites



Here's Roger, and Bugs, and Mickey, and Bugs again. Note that they all have very similar pixel height.

The Game Boy features a 160 by 144 pixels screen. Even by 1989 standards, this was low. Console games used CRT TVs, which featured an interlaced 480 or 576 vertical lines signal. I don't want to get into the nitty-gritty complexities of interlaced signals, but I need to mention that a console like the NES pushed 256 by 240 pixel images (most TVs did not display the top or bottom 8 rows of pixels, which means you have visible 224 rows) and did not interlace another image. Consoles simply used the regular non-interlaced resolution of a TV. Even with these caveats, consoles had a much higher resolution than the Game Boy. This is not even talking of PC gaming, which had started using the VGA graphics standard and its roomy 640 by 480 pixels non-interlaced resolution in 1989.

When bringing the concept of *Roger Rabbit* to the Game Boy, Kemco chose not to resize the characters, keeping them at the same pixel count. Every character used as many pixels as on NES. So here, with this underrated puzzle-action game, we have one of the most important decisions ever



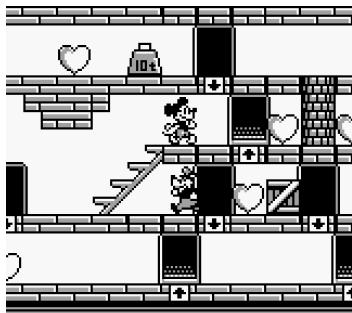
taken regarding Game Boy: characters should not get smaller, you just won't see as much of the level around them. I've talked about this already in my *Mega Man I* article but here we have the very first example of it. In a game based on environmental hazards like *Mega Man*, it's a tough nut to crack. With a simple concept like *Crazy Castle*, where you're on one vertical plane and you're unable to jump, facing usually one enemy at a time, it made a lot of sense to keep Mickey and Bugs with the same level of detail as on a TV. The only thing you needed to be careful about was your level design; make sure your levels reflect your limited view and you're good. This simple decision will immediately become the standard for all future platformers on Game Boy.

## Easier on Game Boy? Not With Those Controls

*The Bugs Bunny Crazy Castle* is not giving you a life bar or a second chance; you need to gather all eight carrots in each level in one attempt. If you die by touching any of the enemies on the map, you need to start that level again with zero collected carrots. So it's one of those games that has lives where it makes no sense having them. There are passwords so you can always continue trying the same level, and

you never reuse your progress within a level, you always start from zero. So why does it have lives? Because games back then had to have lives, that's why.

One interesting feature is what the game calls *video*. It's a way to show you a replay of your last played level. There's no mystery to how they did it; the game has zero randomness so just repeating your inputs can replay exactly what happened. It's still impressive, even with this simple explanation.



Since the game is unforgiving, it should have generous controls to help you; instead they're as unforgiving as the game. The second you go up a staircase you can't cancel it. You actually move forward instead of staying still if you press up or down when not in front of stairs. This means that you could be trying to evade an enemy by going up steps but since you're not in the exact spot to go up you instead rush headlong into that enemy.

The game has unforgiving mechanics and controls but it does not mean it's hard. I skipped around using passwords and I thought it was suddenly going to be too hard to beat but levels stay surprisingly manageable. I even beat the last level, level 80, after five or six tries.

## Conclusion

Making a dumbed down, licensed, easy version of a harsh 1983 game worked. *The Bugs Bunny Crazy Castle* on Game Boy in 1990 ended up in the same position as *Lode Runner* on Famicom in 1984. It was not particularly good but what else are you going to buy? It sold at least a million copies. It's

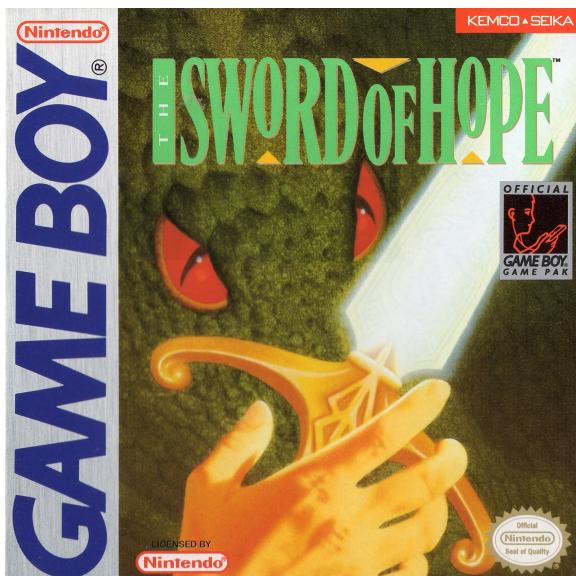
as if Kemco planned it that way. I bet they knew that it was better for them to release a simpler game early than a more complicated game later. They hit the ground running when everybody else was just getting started. Their next Game Boy release, *The Sword of Hope*, would release in December of 1989 two months later and indeed be a more complicated RPG/Adventure game hybrid.

Play *The Bugs Bunny Crazy Castle*; you'll be able to see what a lot of people were playing early on in the Game Boy's life. They had very few other choices until 1991. To them, and to us by extension, it's essential.



# The Sword of Hope

- Japanese release in December 1989
- North American release in June 1991
- Published by Kemco Seika
- Developed by Kemco



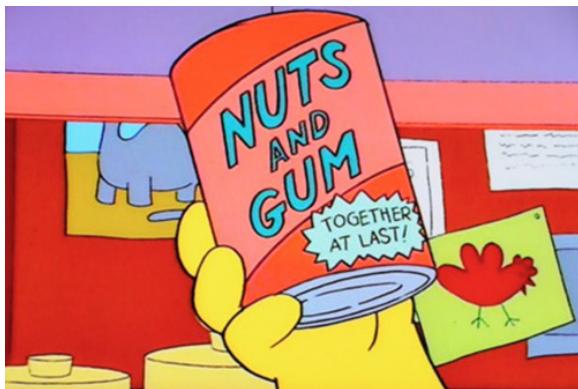
Is that an alligator wall?

# IAKESOCMEK

LV:28	HP:128	MP:74
	GOLD:255	
	EX:21893	
MOVE	TOP PAGODA	
○←↓	LOOK	USE
	OPEN	MAGIC
	HIT	POWER

I'm happy I experienced *The Sword of Hope*, even if I could not find the energy to finish it. It's really unique. It's a game I knew next-to-nothing about and that I'm now fascinated by. *The Sword of Hope* was made by Kemco who had just ported the MacVenture games to Famicom and NES. They had obviously intended to make a game in a similar vein but with a battle system lifted straight from *Dragon Quest*. They did not hit a gold vein: it's reasonable for an early title on Game Boy to be this experimental but peanut butter and jelly it ain't. The mix of RPG and adventure game just fundamentally did not work. Looking at a game that tries its best but does not work is still valuable and essential.

and NUTS. They had obviously intended to make a game in a similar vein but with a battle system lifted straight from *Dragon Quest*. They did not hit a gold vein: it's reasonable for an early title on Game Boy to be this experimental but peanut butter and jelly it ain't. The mix of RPG and adventure game just fundamentally did not work. Looking at a game that tries its best but does not work is still valuable and essential.



Like Nuts and Gum.

## Adventure Games Primer

Back when *The Sword of Hope* was released in Japan in 1989, adventure games had evolved into a very specific genre of video games but they were still at the core the evolution of

text adventure games. Games like 1980s *Zork I* allowed you to wander and interact with a large world through text alone, and as computers became more powerful developers had the brilliant idea of replacing the descriptive text with images. A new genre, called adventure games, was born that used graphics but still allowed the frustrating experience of text input for any interaction:

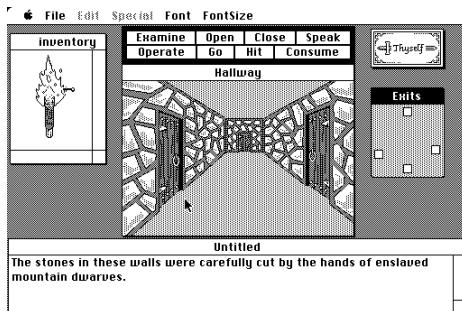
```
> pick up sword  
I DO NOT KNOW WHAT "up" IS  
> pick sword  
CANNOT "pick"  
> take sword  
YOU PICK UP THE SWORD. WHAT DO YOU DO NEXT?  
> go to hell !!!  
I DO NOT KNOW WHAT "to" IS  
>
```

Available on home computers, an expensive luxury at the time, with the best graphics out of any other game type, adventure games were using the limited PC technology to great effect. They also featured a newfangled thing that few other games had: a story. Compared to what is available today, this was laughable but do not dismiss the appeal of having a king give you your mission as you are playing the game. We take it for granted today but in the early '80s having the story of the game unfolds as you are playing was a luxury reserved for the most dedicated video game players who could afford an expensive computer. NES players were stuck reading the manual to get a game's story in the early days of the console.

By 1989, adventure games had moved away from text entry for every action and embraced menu-based interfaces. This was thanks in large part to Enix's Yuji Horii. In 1984 he made *Hokkaidou Rensa Satsujin: Ohotsuku ni Kiyu* for the NEC PC-6001, a Japanese 8-bit computer. This was the sequel to his previous game, *Portopia Renzoku Satsujin Jiken*

which we usually know in the West as *The Portopia Serial Murder Case*. Horii did not like the text parser of adventure games and so replaced it with a menu-based command system. It basically presented you with every verb in the parser from the get go, eliminating the guesswork of what words to use. His team was then tasked to port *The Portopia Serial Murder Case* to the Famicom Disk System. They replaced the complex text entry of *The Portopia Serial Murder Case* with the menu system of its computer sequel thus bringing the genre into the console space in very successful fashion. Westerners might dismiss the importance of this; don't fall into that trap. We might have never gotten *Hokkaidou*, *Portopia* or the myriad adventure games that followed in their footstep on Famicom Disk System but this is because localizing them was never envisioned, not because those games are unimportant. Horii would use the lessons learned with *Portopia* for his next project: the seminal role-playing game *Dragon Quest*, a game of dizzying influence. With *Dragon Quest*, he basically did the same thing he did with *Portopia* again: he simplified the gameplay systems of a western genre, this time the role-playing game. Before *Dragon Quest*, RPGs were usually a complicated, text-heavy affair. Think of a video game spreadsheet. Horii and his team got rid of anything that wasn't absolutely necessary and made it easy for the player to understand what was happening. He also gave the player only a slight setback when they died; you only lose half of your money, and you're brought back to the starting point of the game. This style of RPG referred to as the Japanese RPG or console RPG, is fundamentally the same to this day.

Amongst these exciting times of new genres being born and iterated on, we have Kemco Sekai who was carving its own slice of the Famicom adventure genre by porting the so-called MacVenture games starting in 1988. Released by ICOM innovations on the Macintosh starting in 1985, *Déjà Vu*, *Uninvited* and *Shadowgate* were some of the most inno-



vative adventure games of their time. They used the Macintosh's mouse, which meant you dragged the items in your inventory, clicked on your selected actions, and used a minimap to travel around: they were very forward-looking games with a lot of tactile feedback that took Yuji Horii's innovation another step forward.



They were also incredibly unfair, killing you for the slightest of mistakes. This is not a joke, if you forget to relight your torch in *Shadowgate*, when it extinguishes, you'll break your neck in the dark and die! It is obvious that *The Sword of Hope* owes a great deal to the Kemco port of *Shadowgate* on NES, the fantasy game in the series. It has the same minimap concept, the same vibe, and a very similar interface. It just has a Dragon Quest clone bolted on top of it.

# RPG Through and Through

I've talked a lot about *The Sword of Hope*'s adventure lineage but you really spend three quarters of the game playing an RPG, not an adventure game. Its adventure game lineage might be somewhat convoluted but its RPG roots are dead simple to understand; it's just a copy of the first *Dragon Quest*. I could go on and on about the spell list or the statistics but there's nothing to say. They took *Dragon Quest*, added more redundant spells and allowed you to fight more than one enemy at a time. Its close proximity to *Dragon Quest* brings me to one of my pet peeves with the Game Boy library: I can't find an original mainline RPG. I don't mean that RPGs on the system are bad but they all have something eccentric about them. When I mean mainline, I'm thinking classic *Final Fantasy*, *Dragon Quest* or *Final Fantasy IV* on SNES. Very R-P-G. High-fantasy setting, straightforward combat systems. On Game Boy, I can't find anything original of that exact style. I've previously talked about the madness of *The Final Fantasy Legend* (the sequels are just as crazy). *Lufia* has procedural dungeons that kind of spoil the fun. *Pokémon* is *Pokémon*. You have the first three *Dragon Quest* titles, but they're not original Game Boy games. And *Great Greed*, \*oh boy, let's not even broach \**Great Greed*.

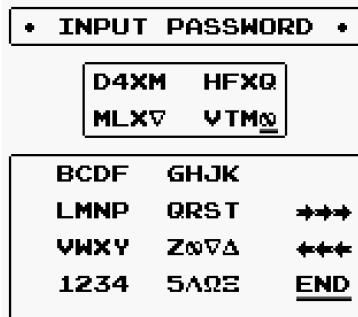


Does this look like the work of a team that finished the artwork?

I was surprised to find that there's a normo RPG hiding

underneath the adventure game veneer of *The Sword of Hope*. But there's an adventure game veneer, so I'm still not satisfied in my desire for a mainline RPG on Game Boy; the search persists.

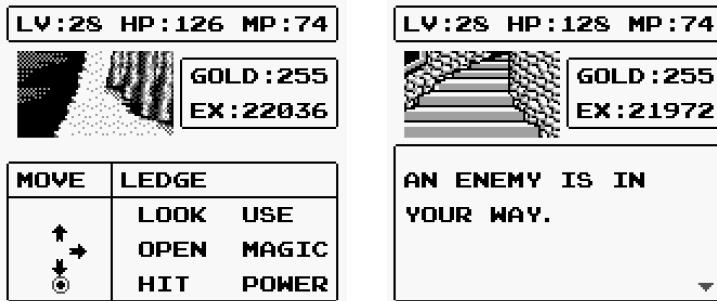
But the RPG that *The Sword of Hope* offers is terribly boring. I guess that's the problem with an RPG with so few choices to make; when your options are attacking or a spell that basically amounts to the same thing, without any variation in enemy type, battles have no meaning and turn into a numbers game. Can you get to where you need to go before you run out of HP, MP, and recovery items? If you grind long enough, you invariably always can. There's no agency, you're just pressing the A button until you're bored. The question becomes whether you can suffer through all the grinding. As I'm getting older, the answer becomes no more often than not. I do not have the energy and time to waste on this. I can't grind and grind and grind because someone in 1989 decided that was how an RPG worked. So I've decided halfway through the game to just punch in an end-of-game password and try my luck from there:



Salvation?

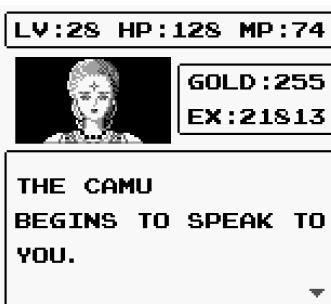
But it's not very helpful; while you don't have to worry about fights and you one-shot all the enemies, you still lose an inordinate amount of time in battles. Enemies are represented with dots on your minimap and if there's a dot in the direction you want to go, you will have no choice but

to fight a battle instead of moving. So you could be stuck for 5–6 battles on the same screen trying to go north. Had they simply changed it to forcing a battle after your move it would have made it completely fine. So even starting from a fully decked-out save and walking to the end boss, knowing what you need to do to get there is still an unbearable chore.



Which I guess teaches me (and you) a very important lesson about games: don't stop the player from doing what they want to do. Punish the player if you must but putting a randomized roadblock in front of your audience only serves to disengage them. You lose any interest quickly when you try six times in a row to go south but you end up in a battle instead, however easy the battles are. Imagine the developers knew their battles were boring; could they have simply removed them and shipped an adventure game? No, the game would have been too simple. There's no real puzzle in the game, nothing much to do except figuring out the routes and what thing to interact with. So the RPG elements are an essential part of the game, no matter how boring they are. I can imagine the developers knowing they didn't have a champion on their hands but still pushing forward, knowing that this early in the life of the Game Boy, a subpar title could still be very successful. They had done exactly that a couple months before with *Mickey Mouse/The Bugs Bunny Crazy Castle*.

# What?



To top off how boring the RPG part of the game is, the text is poorly translated from Japanese. I definitely believe that the translation was made by a non-native speaker. Sentence structures are weird, word choices are sometimes strange but this could all be explained by limited

character space. The thing that confirms we have a second-language translator are the jokes. They're obviously the work of someone with a limited grasp of how English humour functions. For once with the Game Boy Essentials project, I can say something as a true professional: I have a degree in Second Language Acquisition, specifically English. And this game is at the language level of one of my first year student trying their best. Definitely not on the level of a professional translator, even on their worst day.

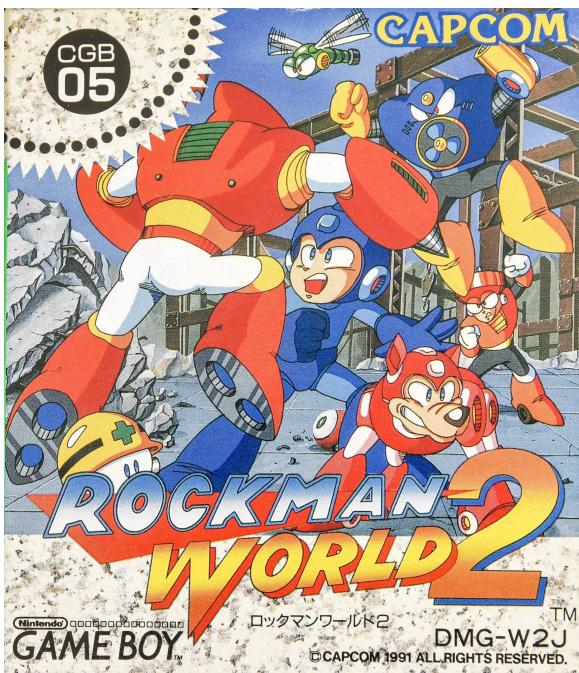
## Conclusion

Maybe someday in the future I'll forget the brain-dead battles, revisit it and finish it. For the time being, I'm happy saying it is essential without saying you need to finish it. You just need to try it out a bit to understand its flaws and why they make it so boring to play for more than a couple of minutes.



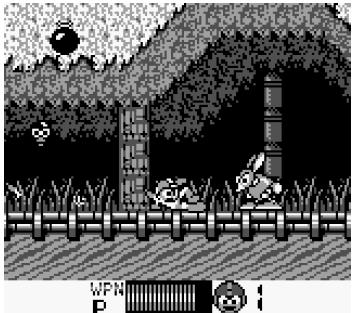
# Mega Man II

- Japanese release in December 1991
- North American release in February 1992
- Published by Capcom
- Developed by Biox



The Japanese had such lovely art on their Mega Man games.

# Another Failed Attempt?



The NES *Mega Man* titles are not perfect; far from it. They're great works of art though. Their controls are tight and responsive because of obvious perfectionism on the developer's part, the level design is usually fun and inventive, the games are unfair but usually for the right reasons.

Because of all this they're a cultural standard that is used to judge sprite-based platformers to this day. They're beloved, and they deserve it.

Comparisons between both families of games, NES and Game Boy, are inevitable. It's absolutely fair; no one can look at an artistic project in a vacuum. And so the NES originals elevate the Game Boy games spun off from them by proxy. They make them better because when you play them, you're obviously pushed into thinking of the NES games they are meant to echo. **This game on my Game Boy is just like the one on my TV!** While the first Game Boy game managed to carry out this task with limited success, managing to bring the concepts of *Mega Man* to a screen with fewer pixels in an ultimately unfair game, the second title does the opposite. It's too easy and too dumb to really ever make you feel like you're playing a real *Mega Man* game. That it was made by a small-time developer with very humble successes helps to explain this failure. Looking at what others have said about *Mega Man II* on Game Boy, people seem happy that you can finish this second title since it's much easier than the first. I'd argue ease of play is not a very *Mega Man* thing to do; you want inventive ways to punish you to make you sharp and swift. Ultimately, just like with the stilted *Mega Man: Dr. Wily's Revenge*, *Mega Man II* is essential because of its

mistakes and problems. They're just completely different.

## Note on Naming Conventions

The NES and Game Boy *Mega Man* games share the same titles which makes it confusing to differentiate between titles. They do, however, have a neat little quirk to help differentiate them: the NES titles use Arabic numbers (2,3,4) while the Game Boy titles use Roman numerals (III, IV, V). So I'll use those to differentiate them. Keep in mind that in Japan the Game Boy series was called *Rockman World*, which I might also write to be extra clear.

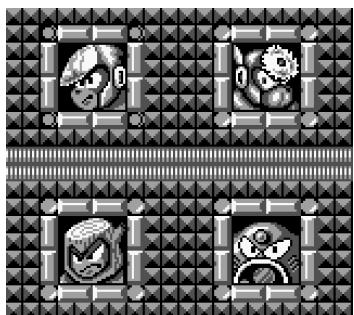
## Biox?

Let's start with two facts: One, *Mega Man: Dr. Wily's Revenge* was too hard for most people. Two, the next game, *Mega Man II* was released within the same year, was made by a different developer and is much easier. So what happened to cause this? Was Minakuchi sacked because they made a game that's too hard? I implied as much in my article about the first game, but I'm not so sure anymore after thinking about it a bit more. I think Capcom wanted as many *Mega Man* games released on Game Boy as quickly as possible and they devised the way to do it: adapt and remix the previous NES games using multiple developers to do it. Having played *Mega Man II* now, I think Biox never came back to do another game because their attempt was just not up to the task of being a fun adaptation of *Mega Man 2*. So Minakuchi wasn't sacked, Biox was.

Let's start with the little details that Biox, the developer of *Rockman World 2*, got wrong.

First, when you hit a life pellet the game doesn't pause and play the little jingle. The game continues **while** your life increases. It's not much, to be sure, but it's a small but essen-

tial part of the experience of playing a *Mega Man* title. *Wily's Revenge* did not have that quirk, properly pausing the game while your life increased, which means that Biox either did it without realizing their mistake or thought getting rid of a staple of the games would be an improvement. It is such a staple of the *Mega Man* franchise to have you stop mid-air, while your life bar replenishes and you can relax for a split second, safe in the knowledge that you are getting the life bars you sorely needed for the challenges ahead.



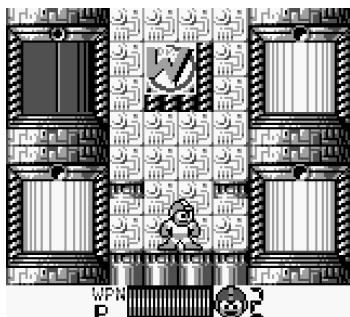
Second, the doors to bosses don't stop the screen from scrolling. When you walk towards them, the screen keeps moving and you can see the corridor beyond. It doesn't happen with every Dr. Wily door, just some. It breaks the illusion and the expectations you are supposed to have regarding this upcoming boss battle.

Third, the weapon select menu sucks. *Mega Man* weapon select menus have always kind of sucked; but here it sucks and they put the Rush Marine as the nearest selection. You use that maybe four times in the whole game, so you spend the whole game having to cursor past it for no good reason. GRRRR.

WPN	
P	██████████
RM	██████████
TP	██████████
WD	██████████
CL	██████████
HA	██████████
EN	EEEEEE

Fourth, the sound Mega Man makes when he touches the ground after jumping is high-pitched for no good reason. You just turn off the volume of your Game Boy after too long of this grating sound. The music also sounds like there's always one note that's off-key. Like the composer put in the

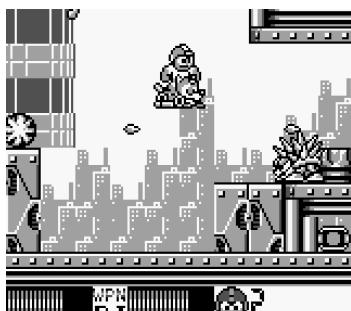
wrong hex code every other note in each song just for kicks.



Fifth, *Mega Man: Dr. Wily's Revenge* featured four bosses from *Mega Man 2* in the boss rush before the final battle instead of having you repeat the same ones again. This was a welcome surprise, a hidden way to make the game meatier. Here for *Rockman World 2*, Biox used

the same surprise again but went one step further and included a full remixed *Mega Man 3* level before each extra *Mega Man 3* boss you have to face. I guess it's nice but it's clunky; half of the game starts from the boss rush room. Luckily they give you a password after you finish each new boss but it's a grating little oversight.

Sixth, Rush Jet works for too long. Rush Jet is the power-up that allows you to call your robot dog as a flying sled you then ride in the air, allowing you to basically bypass any challenge you deem too hard. NES *Mega Man* games knew they had to make Rush Jet useful but only for a short hop. Here it's just too useful. It is so slowly sipping power that it's totally overpowered turning any jumping section meaningless. You simply call Rush Jet and fly over everything that's causing you any trouble.

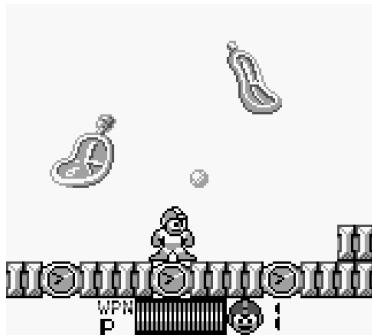


To me, all those little details add up. The *Mega Man* games on NES are extremely conservative. The improvements and changes to the core formula are very calculated. The dash, Rush the robot dog, the charge shot and the rest are all additions to shake up the underlying formula which

**stayed the same for six games.** That the developers at Biox broke the underlying formula shows their lack of understanding of what is ultimately the appeal of *Mega Man*. The people at Minakuchi excelled at getting the fundamentals right, even though their game was just as flawed.

## Clocks?

Here's another example of how the people at Biox missed the appeal of *Mega Man*. The Clash Man level on NES is very fun as an environment. You ascend a tower of tubes until you reach the top of the atmosphere to a dark sky devoid of stars. Then you reach the boss high up in space and fight him. Boom, that's pure unadulterated *Mega Man*. The Game Boy Clash Man level has you ascend at first until you reach a background of mountains. Then you start going down and the walls of the level are suddenly a different tileset. The concept of the NES level is completely abandoned. I feel like different people designed different sections of levels and they connected them together haphazardly. They didn't think of creating an experience they just went ahead and made levels, making sure it wasn't too hard. They didn't make sure it was challenging or cohesive or fun or anything, the modus operandi was **not too hard**. This game was made quickly, and it shows! You end up with a disjointed experience that feels more influenced by a short development time than by the *Mega Man* series on NES. Time seems to be the theme of the game here, and there's this whole back story with time travel. To hammer the point home, the last level of the game features clocks in the background, more specifically the clocks from Dali's *Persistence of Memory*. What?



You'd usually find *Mega Man* inspirations in anime, not modern art!

## My Biggest Problem

The biggest battle of the game, the thing you should be most excited about is against a dude on a pogo stick!

A pogo stick!

A pogo stick!

And it's not just any dude. It's an evil, future Mega Man that Doctor Wily has somehow transported back in time to fight present day stick-in-the-mud Mega Man.

Evil future Mega Man on a pogo stick!

A POGO STICK!

How? How? How?

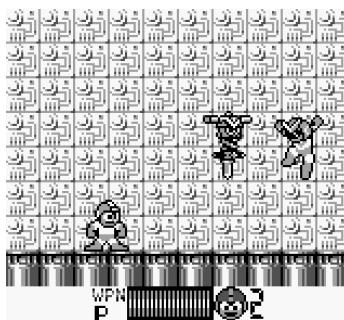
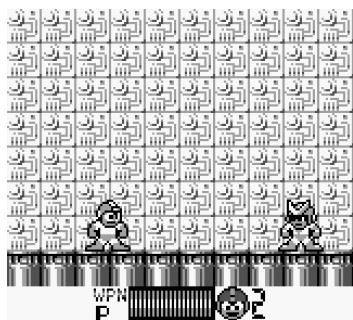
It is not a rhetorical question. I am dead serious. What confluence of madness, drugs, translation, laissez-faire and early 90s Japanese miracle bubble mentality led them down the path of future evil Mega Man on a pogo stick? The Mega Man series is not known for its serious attitude. You fight robot rabbits who throw robot carrots at you. Robot birds who throw eggs from which emerges a throng of mini robot

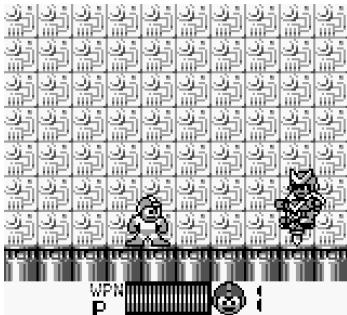
chicks who lunge in your direction. I am talking here, to be clear, about robot baby birds guided missiles. How cool is that? There was, however, never anything so high-concept as evil future Mega Man on a pogo stick. The things you fight are cartoon robots based on animals, appliances, the general theme of the level's boss. *Mega Man: Dr. Wily's Revenge* introduced the concept of a Mega Man Killer. It's a robot built to destroy Mega Man that you fight on your way to Dr. Wily: the Darth Vader to the Emperor. In tropes term, a dragon.

So Biox ran with that idea and created a new dragon for their game. The best thing they could come up with was an idiot with sunglasses on his dumb stupid pogo stick.

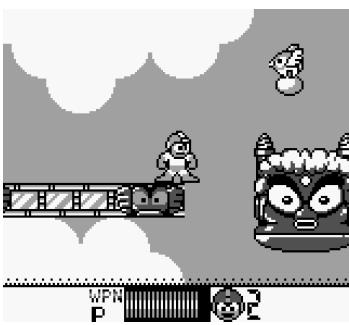
Which, of course, this being a *Mega Man* game, you then win as a weapon once you beat your future self. Mega Man steals his pogo stick from himself. It's, of course, called Saku-garne and it is useless except against the last form of the last boss where it is secretly very strong. Of course.

I mean, they had to have come up with the character design before inventing a dumb pogo-based history for him, right? There's no explanation anywhere in the game that he's come from the future with his pogo stick. . . OH MY GOD IS THE POGO STICK HIS TIME MACHINE?





## Conclusion



My main problem with *Mega Man II* is that it's an OK Game Boy game but it is not particularly worthy of the *Mega Man* title. However, its flaws did not stop people from enjoying it; it was easier and still somewhat competent and it sold at least a million copies. Being after the most beloved NES title must have helped. It was quickly rereleased as a Players' Choice title in 1993.

*Mega Man* on NES is a reliable series. You're always doing something invigorating throughout every game. You can count on it. On Game Boy, the series was definitely not reliable. After experiencing the first and second Game Boy cartridges in depth, I've seen too many ups and downs. That those two titles were made by different developers helps explain it: Biox could obviously not build on the knowledge learned by the developers at Minakuchi Engineering to make a better sequel. With that in mind, I'm looking forward to the return of Minakuchi with *Mega Man III*. I've played *Mega Man IV* extensively and I love it so I can't wait to play the third game; I have no idea whether it's excellent like *IV* or kind-of-bad like *II*.



Oh go to hell with your goddamn pogo stick.

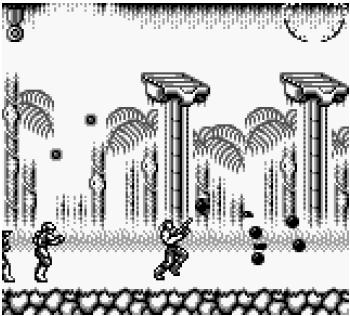
# Operation C

- Japanese release in January 1991
- North American release in February 1991
- European release in 1992
- Published by Ultra Games
- Developed by Konami



Don't sue, that's totally not Arnold Schwarzenegger!

# Baby Contra



Making a competent adaptation for Game Boy is not an exact science. In my previous article, I argued that Biox's *Mega Man II* has the basic concepts done properly, but that they just mangled the execution. The skeleton is OK but the rest of the body is too weird.

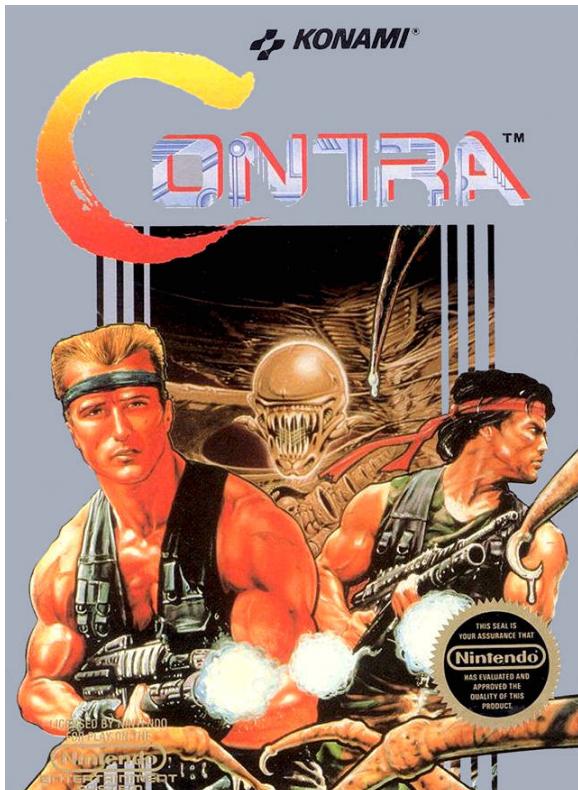
On the other hand, Konami's *Operation C*, known in Japan as simply *Contra* and in Europe as *Probector*, is the real deal. The sprite size, walking and jumping speed, level of detail, everything is well tuned, so the skeleton of the game is great. Then they went ahead and added all the trimmings. Levels, weapon selection, game length, enemy types, difficulty. All those details fit perfectly too. Konami really got it right, just like with their previous game I covered, *Nemesis*. Once again, the fine people at Konami made an essential game. I still remember to this day the joy of playing this game when I was a kid. And I played this game late, since a friend first lent it to me around 1998.

## Collect S to Win

Close your eyes and think of the *Contra* games. What images come to mind? For me, it's mostly *Contra III: The Alien Wars* on SNES and its hyperactive attitude. I think of explosions, frenetic jumping from missile to missile while flying through the air, and more explosions. That's the later *Contra* series' attitude, having evolved its own style based on explosions and insane situations. But *Operation C* came out



earlier, when the games were action-packed to be sure but they were a bit more sedate. Their marketing and situations were clearly trying to bank on the love of *Predator*, *Alien* and *Rambo* with a good measure of *Commando* thrown in. I'm being nice here, they weren't just going for the style of those movies, they were literally tracing promotional pictures for those movies to put on the game covers.



It's Rambo and Matrix fighting against the Xenomorph! No wonder everybody **loved** Contra.

Within those traced packages where games that were a bit more . . . subdued than what would suddenly burst through with 1992's *Contra III*. What we have with *Operation C* is the last hurrah of that classic *Contra* era. The Japanese cover has a blatant mix of Michael Biehn and Arnold on its cover

but the American game's box is clearly not trying to sell us on a Stallone/Schwarzenegger video game, it's forging a new unique identity for *Contra* (fun fact: the artist for this cover, Tom DuBois, is now a hardcore Christian artist). The game itself is a Game Boy adaptation of the NES adaptation of the arcade *Super Contra*. These three-step adaptations are way more common in video games than you might think and here we have one of my favourite ones. This little game is just awesome.



I often hear commentators, youtubers, podcasters start talking about a Game Boy game with: *Even though it's on Game Boy, it's still good. How surprising!* These are benign comments not given much thought, a reflex to think that portable systems are somehow a lesser thing, that somehow the

natural state of a portable game is to be bad. But there is no surprise that *Operation C* is an extraordinary game. It was made by a company with a stellar reputation for quality in 1991, a small group of four internal developers used to the Game Boy. Of course it's good even though it's on Game Boy!



The Japanese version allows you to select any of the first four levels.

# Remember, Sully, When I Promised to Kill You Last?

Let's talk about the story. Actually let's not because **I don't care!** When I go on websites online to read about *Contra* games there's always this undue attention paid to the story and the timeline and how the American games are not set in the same period as the Japanese ones. It's all useless hogwash! Nobody has ever played a *Contra* game to continue exploring the rich story of the *Contra* universe. You just want to walk right and kill stuff from 80s movies!



## GIVE YOUR GAME BOY A TASTE OF COMBAT, CONTRA STYLE.

Mmmmm, Operation C™ for Game Boy™ has all the brutal battle flavor of the NES hit Contra.™ But here's the bite: this time it's Scorpion alone versus Black Viper—Red Falcon's partner in slime—who's turned a secret naval lab into an experimental alien freak factory.

To blow away Black Viper's pit of hideous genetic mishaps, you must blitz five merciless war zones including Mutant Mountain, Phlegm Forest and the dreaded Cave O' the Crud Creatures. All infested with zombies, mutated bloodhounds, squid-like seagoing spiders, death-dealing techno-terrors and more.

Of course, in true Contra style, you'll have to upgrade your arms as you go with Spread Guns, Fire Guns and the all new vermin-seeking Homing Gun. Three lives plus a Continue Mode may keep you going. But Black Viper's awfully hungry and you're going to make a tasty Blue Plate Special.



**ULTRA** GAMES

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The ad copy is clear that it only has single-player. It was important to warn people it did not have *Contra*'s greatest feature: simultaneous coop.

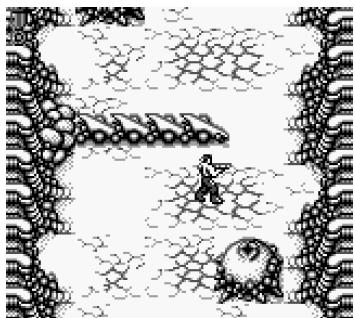
## I Lied.

The game is one Megabit (not byte), so it's a very small program. This does not mean anything without context, so let's bring it to something you will understand. *Operation C* is twice as big as *Super Mario Land* in size. That's not big! *Super Mario Land* is minuscule, with its small levels and very limited tileset. So *Operation C* has more room in the cartridge for enemy types, for longer levels and more detailed tiles, but twice the size is not a panacea. We're still talking about 131 kilobytes (not bits), a laughably small amount of space for a complete program with music and graphics. A small programmable space like that means the programmers and designers could not do everything they wanted. They could not draw and program too many enemies, meaning they had to reuse enemy types and their projectiles. They could not draw too many tiles, meaning the levels could not be too detailed. They had to get wise with the tiles they could fit on the cart to make interesting environments. Those are big limits to what you can do.

As the *Contra* series got older, you had more and more unique situations that you faced that correlated directly with an increase in cartridge size. With *Contra: Hard Corps* on Genesis, the series reached the apex of this evolution with a constant boss rush, with barely any reused enemy or environment to be seen. *Contra* went from an intelligent repetition of enemies and patterns to a series of custom-built set pieces.

And *Operation C* is the most repetitive of the *Contra* games. The fourth level, one of the game's two overhead level, has only two enemy types and one environmental hazard. Yet it manages to stay frantic and surprising. Even the boss reuses the same projectile as one of the enemy types in the level but its new projectile patterns make it fresh. They really stretched every little concept they built. It's really surprising to see how much of the game is recycled while staying surprising and vi-

brant. They pull every trick in the book to make you forget the recycling.



Again in level four, you have those weird invincible protrusions that come out of walls to try and hit you. They use every permutation of pattern I can think of to give you a different challenge every time you encounter them, and they place enemies in varying places to make it more complicated to navigate around them. I urge you to play the game and look for the tricks the developers used to maximize their assets. It's fun!

## The Size of Scene Elements

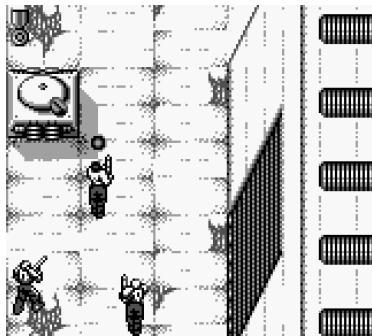
The developers have applied the same lesson here as in *Nemesis*. Everything in the game is a bit smaller than on NES, but not too small. You still don't see as high or as far. They've made your character literally a head smaller.



Literally a head smaller.

So your character is smaller but he's not small enough to take the same amount of space as on a TV; he's still so big that he eats up more space. That's fine, as we've seen

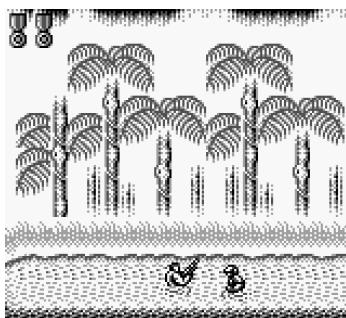
with *Nemesis* and *The Bugs Bunny Crazy Castle*. You adapt the gameplay to fit the screen resolution, and that's what they did here. They were helped in this by how the series works. You see, the Contra dude (I steadfastly refuse to remember his name) is slower to move than Mega Man or most other characters in platform games. He's not zipping around as fast and jumping as much. You move slower, have fewer jumps to clear and spend much more time aiming at enemies coming from all directions. Those concepts were much more suited to the smaller resolution of the Game Boy. You don't need to redesign everything around your main character to make the game work; you just have to be looser with enemy aggressiveness and placement. They also limited the amount of flying enemies you see and kept the two overhead levels on a tight leash in terms of bullet hell. That makes *Operation C* easier than the console or arcade versions because you can't have enemies pop out on the screen at the same rate as on those; the screen is smaller and you'd be swamped. So enemies telegraph their moves a bit more, move a bit slower, shoot a bit less bullets. No enemies in *Operation C* are as fast as the dogs in the first level of *Contra III*.



# Small Quality-of-Life Improvements

The game introduces auto-fire to the series, meaning you can hold the A button to keep firing. That way you don't have to mash the A button all the damn time. It's a different approach that changes the game a lot, reducing the amount of time you spend aiming and it turns you into a firehose of bullets. You need to be challenged in different, less interesting ways because of that. It was a necessary change in hindsight to keep the series approachable and save our thumbs.

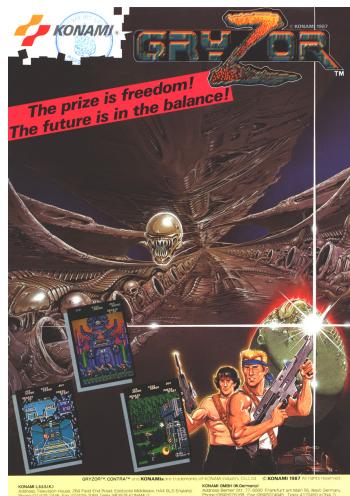
All subsequent games would use the same system, with *Contra 4* having the genius of allowing both shooting methods. In *Contra 4*, made by the fine folks of WayForward Technologies, holding the button gives you a satisfying, steady stream of bullets but mashing the button makes even more bullets appear, giving you that small edge you so often need. So you can rest your thumb on the button most of the time and mash when you get in a tight spot. It's so intelligent as to be maddening. Why did nobody else thought about it before? Oh WayForward, how I like thee!



Don't worry, I haven't forgotten to talk about the Konami code too. On the North American (*Operation C*) and European (*Probotector*) releases, punching in the code allows you to access the level select from the original Japanese version. The Japanese (*Contra*) version instead uses it to give you nine lives. Look up the GameFAQs description of what each code does for more details.

# Let Off Some Steam, Bennett.

We need to talk about censorship, kids. First off, it's not what you think. If a country has a legally binding review board that deems cultural content inappropriate for *minors* and thus enforces that the material only be sold to adults, that's not exactly censorship. Nobody's harshly censored, you're just deemed inappropriate for sale to children. An adult will have to make the call on whether or not their children can play those games.



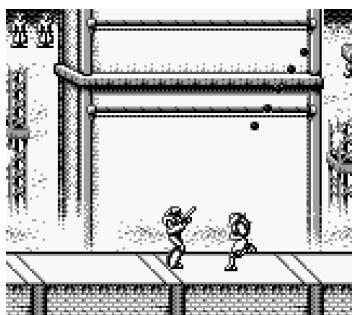


So if a company then looks at its video game, thinks there might be *a chance* its clear pastiche of all the movies glorifying war in the '80s might be deemed inappropriate for children and then voluntarily modifies its game to make sure its product can be sold directly to children, that's again not exactly censorship. So why am I talking about this? Because *Contra* has a complicated history with European classification boards, that's why. When the time came to bring the original *Contra* arcade game to Europe, I guess the political heat on the Iran-Contra affair meant the name was deemed inappropriate: the arcade game was called *Gryzor* in Europe. The sequel *Super Contra* did not change its title in Europe, probably because by 1988 the whole political catastrophe was no longer in the news. Still, the series, ostensibly about shooting aliens and robots in the face, has forever been attached with the illegal smuggling of cash from secret Iranian arms deals to fund a brutal antigovernment rebel group in Nicaragua by the United States. And Konami did not innocently fall into this controversy. *Contra* and *Super Contra* start with jungle levels, which, of course, forces you to connect the game with the Contras themselves, and the original arcade title has a music track called Sandinista, after the socialist government the Contras were fighting against! So the people at Konami

knew what they were doing. Even in North America they somewhat retired the *Contra* name for a while, using *Super C* and *Operation C* to obfuscate the connection.



Now that's just the entrée in the long history of *Contra* and controversy; with the console version of *Contra* in Europe, the German Protection of Young Persons Act reared its head. It's a law meant to protect children and teenagers from being exposed to material deemed inappropriate for them. While most countries are content with having industry-regulated classification boards giving ratings to games, the German went one step ahead and made it a government-controlled board. Couple that with the fact that it is very clear that *media carrying content glorifying war* is not to be sold to minors, and you have a skittish Konami. Let's be honest here: *Contra* is totally glorifying war. So Konami did the sensible corporate thing; they completely re-skinned *Contra* with robots instead of humans and changed the name for good measure to *Probotector*. They then released this version for all of Europe. They self-censored.



They did this **of their own volition**, since they seemed to have never submitted *Contra* in its original form for any classification in Europe. They only submitted the modified robot version. So every subsequent game, including *Operation C*, replaced all the humans with robots. I kind of like it, the robots look rad. It's a nice change of pace. I don't think Europeans missed out on anything by having robot-on-robot action.

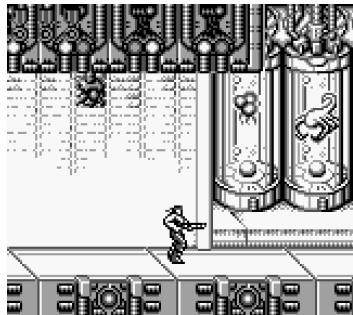
# Standard Collection Reissue



Just like *Nemesis* and most of the early Konami Game Boy titles, it was rereleased with the four-volume *Konami GB Collection* in 1997 in Japan and in 2000 in the UK. The same comments I gave to *Nemesis* apply for *Operation C*. The colour palette of the UK GBC version is woefully inappropriate, really giving credence to all the negative comments you get about the Game Boy Color's pastel colours. You can often see the jagged edges where the tiles change colour palettes; it's not a good job. What is interesting is that the European release keeps the unique title for the European market, *Probotector*, but skips the replacement of the characters with robots. With the arrival of the current German classification board in 1994, what is and isn't fair to release to minors in Germany had obviously changed. Oh and the *Konami GB Collection* was never released in Germany anyway, just in the UK. All of this makes it the last game to use the *Probotector* title (on consoles, Konami had stopped renaming their European versions after *Contra: Hard Corps* on Genesis in 1994). They clearly just took the easy way out: the game still uses the Japanese version, since it features the level select absent from the North American and European original releases.

## Conclusion

*Operation C* is an essential step in the Game Boy story of Konami. It again shows that *Nemesis* was not a fluke. The fine people at Konami seem to have understood the Game Boy right away. I have not talked so far about all of Konami's output on Game Boy in the early days, with games like *Motocross Maniacs*, *Twin Bee*, the first *TMNT* game and particularly *Castlevania: The Adventure* showing other attempts by Konami that were not always successful. I'll get to those in due time but I can say with confidence that Konami had a very good at-bat on Game Boy.



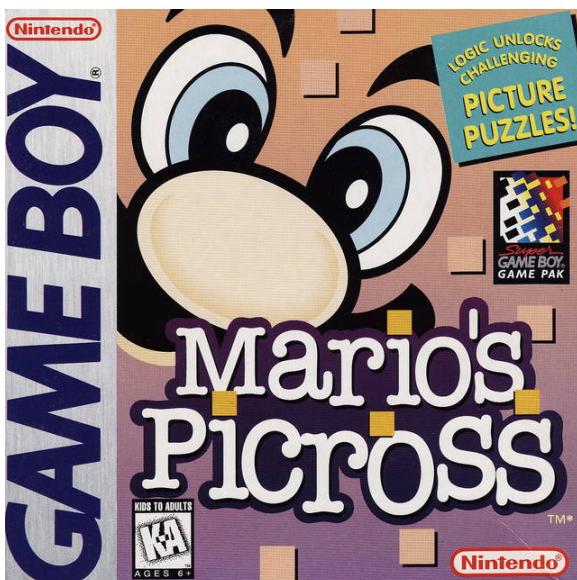
Compared with their compadres at Capcom who stumbled twice with their mascot Mega Man and the subcontractors they entrusted him with, Konami was on point from the get go on Game Boy by doing the job themselves.





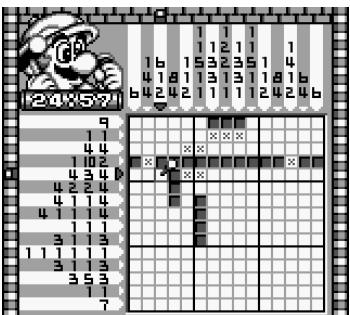
# Mario's Picross

- Japanese & North American release in March 1995
- European release in July 1995
- Published by Nintendo
- Developed by Jupiter



Plumber, referee, golfer, Picross player?

# Nono



I have a list of Game Boy games I want to check out and feature on Game Boy Essentials. With over 2000 titles released across the original Game Boy and Game Boy Color, I have looked at multiple sources to winnow the list into a reasonable amount of games to research further.

I have yet to fire up every single game in an emulator, so I rely on a lot of common sense to figure out what is potentially essential. Initially, *Mario's Picross* flew under the radar for most people, me included. I came upon it by chance, only knowing *Mario's Picross* as an adaptation of nonograms by Nintendo. It was popular in Japan but nobody cared in North America, so Jupiter promptly stopped bringing their Picross games here. So knowing only this I decided to play the game for a minute and I fell in love. I went through the tutorial to learn the rules and liked it so much I immediately bought a book to try nonograms on paper. That's how essential this game is; it will make you buy books!

## A Primer on Nonograms

So what are nonograms anyway? A nonogram is a grid with numbers on its side indicating how many squares need to be pencilled in on each row and column. You apply logic to figure out which ones can be safely filled in and which ones can be safely discarded. When you're done, you have a picture of an umbrella or a race car or something. To me nonograms are particularly soothing; you're painting with logic instead of artistry, and I am way better at logic than artistry! It's not that dissimilar to a Sudoku, but I'd argue it's a more varied

experience. It's got more legs to get you to play just. One. More. Grid.

## It's-a-Me, Market Buster!

The question that fascinates me with nonograms is: why are they so utterly unpopular? Sudoku is everywhere, tends to be well-known, is the golden standard of *book you buy at the cash register next to an Archie omnibus*. Why aren't nonograms, which are ostensibly the same thing as Sudoku (fidgeting around with numbers and squares) not more popular? I've thought about it and I think it comes down to two things. First of, Picross is one of those rare paper game that's better on a computer.

On paper, Picross is ostensibly about not making mistakes. If you make a mistake, it can easily propagate all over your nonogram like a virus and you've lost all your effort, since what you do has an impact on everything around it. So a one square mistake can propagate for dozens of squares before you realize you've messed up. So it's a game about focus, about making sure your work is perfect at all times. When you screw up a nonogram on paper, you might as well throw the whole thing in the trash. It is stupidly difficult to figure out your mistake and walk it back. *Mario's Picross*, on the other hand, will always tell you when you make a mistake, completely changing the focus of the game from perfection to quick execution. You see, if the developers only warned you of mistakes without any consequence the game would be meaningless, you could just bash at random until you had found all the black squares. But the developers at Jupiter put a timer on every puzzle. And when you make a mistake, you lose time. Only two minutes at first, but you lose four and then eight minutes per mistake. When you have thirty minutes to complete the puzzle that means you could quickly lose all your progress. Then you're thrown back at the puzzle select screen and you can start the same puzzle over from scratch,

with a leg-up because you remember what you already did, but now you have to do it all over again. So *Mario's Picross* is a game about being as perfect as possible and properly managing your mistakes. I'd argue this is a more fun proposition than keeping perfect focus on paper.

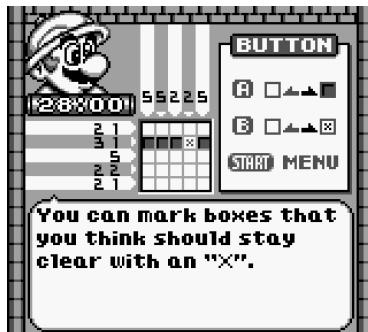
Even though they are more fun as a video game, why are they absent from the books you buy at the grocery store? Beats me. I will obsess to an unreasonable degree about Game Boy games and their business prospects but I'm not going to start obsessing about the grocery store puzzle market. I'm not **that** much of a nerd.

The second reason I think nonograms are so unpopular is Nintendo will support something so well they steal all the oxygen from a genre. Since the Jupiter implementation of nonograms is more fun than doing it on paper, I don't think anybody really saw the appeal beyond what Jupiter was offering. This would not be the first time they would do this to a genre. Look at the *Mario Kart* or *Legend of Zelda* franchises; two of the most popular game franchises ever. There are clones and adaptations to be sure, but never in enough quantity to really move the genre forward. Nintendo has the market cornered for vehicular mascot combat and action-adventure games strong on puzzles. They will bring you a version of those experiences every four years and capture a majority of sales. Why bother with imitations then? The same thing happened with monster-collecting, where *Pokémon* snuffed out all its competitors to extinction by just being so much more streamlined. I think ultimately the same thing happened with *Mario's Picross* but on a much smaller scale: Jupiter did it well enough in a small enough market that nobody else bothered. Even though Nintendo quickly figured out the market wasn't there for them in North America, no small developer gave nonograms a chance when they might have been able to turn a profit.

# The Game Itself

There's not much to say specifically about the game. It's interesting to note that some puzzles are different from the Japanese version, which uses Japanese characters and objects (and also alcohol) for its solutions. So Jupiter replaced some puzzles.

The controls are perfect for your intended purpose. I thought nonograms would have better controls on paper but they really don't. Doing it on paper is time-consuming compared to the zippy dashes you can do on Game Boy. It's a testament to how natural those controls are that when I tried the 3DS version I did not use the stylus but stuck to the D-Pad. It was just faster that way.



The game nicely introduces the concept of nonograms to beginners.

One negative aspect is that the hard puzzles are accessible only after you complete all the easy puzzles. They're so easy and brain-dead that it turns completing them into a chore and so I haven't even bothered unlocking those harder puzzles. That's a shame.

# Competition From Strange Places

So Jupiter made a very nice version of Picross but it didn't catch on in North America. Why? *Mario's Picross* was not only competing against other Game Boy games when it was released; I remember that by the mid-90s electronic card games were ubiquitous and were competing against the Game Boy for the general population's attention. My aunt had an electronic *Skip-Bo* and that thing was **beloved** at family parties. It was a smorgasbord of middle-aged ladies arguing about who would play next. They would play one game and then proudly declare they needed to buy one; the appeal for them was not that you could play the machine at a family gathering. The appeal was that you could play the thing alone at home. No need for those pesky in-laws to play with. They would never have thought to buy a video game on their own but once they were introduced to the little dedicated machine by peers who vouched for it, they could immediately see the benefit of such a machine.



When I instead brought my Game Boy that was a thing

we kids would fawn over but adults would not give it a second look. It served no purpose, replaced no family members for them. I guess my adult family members were not enthralled by *The Legend of Zelda: Link's Awakening* like my nephews were. But that little *Skip-Bo* machine was the shit to them. Even though it had an unlit screen, like the Game Boy. Even though it needed more batteries than felt reasonable. Even if it could only play one game, goddamn *Skip-Bo* of all things. It was ultimately cheap with a veneer of adult respectability, since it was sold in the toy section but next to the playing cards. They are great examples of what adults thought a portable game was in the mid-90s. My aunts are still playing games today, going on Facebook for social games and buying iPads for *Candy Crush*.

In 1989 Nintendo could bring out a new puzzle concept with *Tetris* and seduce the whole planet. By the release of *Mario's Picross* in 1995, dedicated electronic puzzles had muddied Nintendo's lock on the mindshare for portable puzzles. In a sense it was the revenge of the LCD games I talked about in my *Super Mario Land* article. While there wasn't much left to do artistically with LCD screens in terms of games for kids, you could still make an interesting product for adults. All of that to say that adults were no longer a solid market for the Game Boy in 1995. I don't want you to get the wrong idea: I don't think adults completely stopped playing Game Boy. I just think the initial awe over the machine's uniqueness had subsided. The Game Boy in 1989 was the next Japanese wunderkind after the Sony Walkman. Everybody wanted one. By 1995, it was still the best portable system by begrudging acceptance that nothing better had surfaced. You would constantly hear on TV, from friends, from everybody that **this** portable system was finally going to displace the old crusty Game Boy. I remember watching a kids show about technology that spent thirty minutes showing off the Sega Nomad and trying to convince you that this



You didn't even need the manual; the back had all the instructions you needed.

was finally going to be the system to **kill the Game Boy**. It took Nintendo until 1998 to finally *kill* their baby themselves with the Game Boy Color and it was merely an improved iteration.

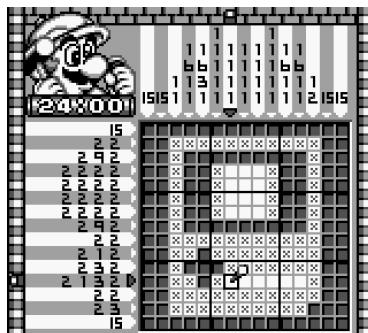
## 2017: The Future

Nintendo ultimately gave Picross another go in North America with the DS, to more success since the DS had a lot of appeal with a more varied audience. On DS and 3DS, they released great versions of Picross, but they also pushed the genre forward with versions where you interact with a 3D

puzzle. Those felt ho-hum. They made *Pokémon Picross more recently*, a free-to-pay title for 3DS even though Picross does not gel with micro transactions at all. It's an attempt at emulating the crass games on iPhone and Jupiter did not push that further: their next game, *Picross S* for Switch, is a conservative paid release.

## Conclusion

*Mario's Picross* shows that Nintendo never stopped trying to chase the next big puzzle game. The next *Tetris*, so to speak. Throughout the '90s they released many puzzle games, and they've all but stopped searching nowadays because they figured out that their adult audience that bought *Tetris* to play puzzle games had moved on to cheaper, dedicated, game machines and we now play puzzle games on our phones. The people at Nintendo eventually got their next big mainstream breakthrough. Just not with a puzzle game, but with *Pokémon*.





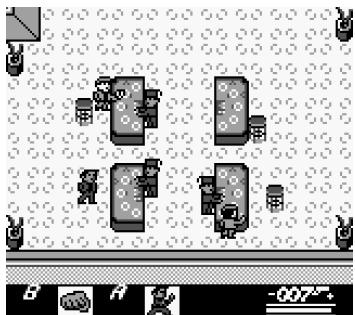
# James Bond 007

- European release in January 1998
- North American release in February 1998
- Never released in Japan
- Published by Nintendo
- Developed by Saffire



They clearly did not have Pierce Brosnan's likeness rights; the face is a black smudge to hide that they didn't pay Pierce.

# Boy, Game Boy



When it came out, *Goldeneye* took the world by storm. It rejuvenated the aging spy and made him relevant and cool again. But to some kids, the movie was a secondary concern. To them, what made James Bond cool again was *Goldeneye 007* for Nintendo 64. I am one of

those kids. Nights spent playing multiplayer matches against friends. No Oddjob, Facility, Slappers Only, yeah, baby, yeah ( . . . sorry, wrong British spy). With our Nintendo 64, we were playing the best game of its genre. Before *Goldeneye*, if you wanted to play the best First-Person Shooters, you had to get a \$2,000 PC. *Doom*, *Duke Nukem 3D*, *Quake* were all complex PC *experiences*. They had ports to consoles, especially *Doom*, but those were unsatisfying. You did not get the full experience, only a gimped substitute. But when *Goldeneye* came out, you could not only play a great First-Person Shooter, it was arguably the **best** FPS for a time. The controls were primitive but the game was built around them, not despite them. It was a revelation, and birth a genre still vacuuming up all the attention and money to this day: the console FPS. Game Boy Essentials is not interested in the multimillion *game as a service* console FPSes that grew from the N64 classic like *Battlefront II* or *Destiny 2*. Instead, we're covering the second and only other thing Nintendo did with the rights to the James Bond franchise in 1998. They commissioned a Utah developer to make a *Legend of Zelda* clone starring James Bond on Game Boy. It was so crazy it actually worked and we ended up with an essential Game Boy title.

# Goldthumbs

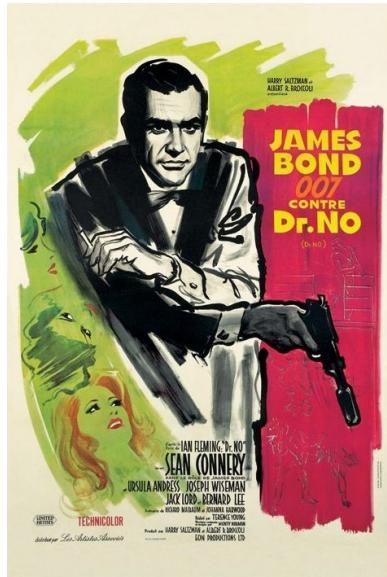
I purchased *James Bond 007* in 1998 because it was, of course, a James Bond game. By then I had started getting interested in James Bond beyond the Nintendo 64 game. I saw the game on a shelf, unaware that it even existed before that exact moment; I promptly purchased it. This meant that my first experience with quintessential villains Oddjob and Jaws was through their portrayal in a Game Boy game. Life before ubiquitous internet access was weird.

This highlights a weird reality of movies before the modern era of the internet. You could not easily catch up on a franchise like James Bond since you were at the mercy of other realities. You could only watch a James Bond movie, for example, if it was on TV. If you were rich enough to afford cable (my family could), you had more opportunities to catch up on those movies since you had more channels. Or you could rent it if your local video rental store had it. Since I lived in a small town with one small VHS rental store of about 500 movies, they did not have a lot of movies beyond the very recent. Popular movies were often borrowed by other people so you had to pick something else. You could buy VHS tapes in stores, but those were kind-of expensive and my family did not buy a lot of movies; we rented instead. And since I was an anal-retentive kid (I still am) I had to start with the first film, *Dr. No*, so it was a no go if they only had *Goldfinger*. God forbid I pick up a copy of a later film without having seen the first one!



A couple of summers after I got the Game Boy game, Radio-Canada played a James Bond film every Thursday at 9 pm over the summer. I saw them all that way, in crummy

pan-and-scan with their gloriously dumb French translations. I could finally experience the movies, just later than I wanted. That Radio-Canada summer event is as much responsible for my appreciation of James Bond as anything else. It was in the correct production order and during the summer so I could go to bed late and finish the films. Before the internet made everything available all the time, you became a fan of the things that were accessible.



## A View to a Green-Hued Kill

Let's get back to *James Bond 007* on Game Boy and how it came to be. Since it was released a mere six months after the N64 juggernaut, it would be easy to lump it with the James Bond video game licence ordeal caused by the storied success of the Nintendo 64 game. You can



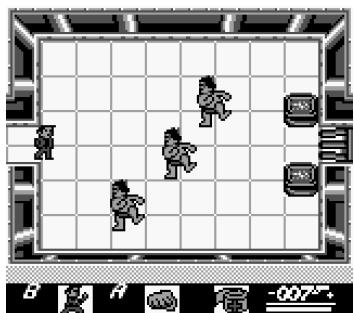
see that the Fleming clan, or MGM or whoever was overseeing the franchise expected another giant success like *Goldeneye 007* but the developers put to the task just couldn't pull it off. There was too much ambition and not enough artistry, the fit was never right. They tried games based on the current movies and it didn't work. They went their own way with games that emulate the movies and it didn't work. They went so low as to put the name *Goldeneye* on games that had nothing to do with the Rare-developed game and it didn't work. James Bond seems like a perfect video game franchise, but the developers who could really make the concept sing don't bother with licensed games.

In this climate of high expectations and big budgets, *James Bond 007* on Game Boy seems impossible. No one in their right mind would think to release a small Game Boy game after freaking *Goldeneye 007*! But all of this does not apply, since the development of the game had to start before *Goldeneye*'s accursed success. The N64 game released in the summer of 1997, and with the Game Boy game releasing a mere six months later, there is no way in hell they started the game's development after *Goldeneye 007* became a success. I also do not believe there was any attempt to capitalize on the success of *Goldeneye*. Game Boy licensed games were never meant to be exciting franchise events to be covered by glossy magazines; they were always placeholders, meant to fill up shelf space displaying their respective franchises in stores. If they had known how popular *Goldeneye 007* was going to be, I'm sure they would have changed the Game Boy game to be a *Goldeneye* title. I also looked at the Internet Archive's collection of video game magazines and I found no reference to the Game Boy game until a full year later, in 1999. If Nintendo ever thought of *James Bond 007* as a game that was meant to capitalize on the success of Rare's game, they did the worst job at it. Looking at the low-key release of the Game Boy game, I think they had a broad licence to release

one James Bond game on each of their platforms. Yamauchi, Nintendo's president and real-life James Bond villain, then found appropriate developers who understood each system's appeal. A loud, inventive FPS by their British partners at Rare for their loud 3D console. A driving game also by Rare for the Virtual Boy. It was obviously never finished, just like the Virtual Boy itself. Finally, a quirky Zelda clone by Saffire, a small developer hungry for success, for the small console that ruled the gaming world.

That's how I believe it was licensed to Nintendo; keep the British spy on worldwide shelves. The thing is I don't know the truth and it's possible we will never know.

## A Quantum of Gameplay



Saffire Corporation was a small developer based in American Fork, Utah who only had two games under their belt when they made *James Bond 007*. Their biggest call to fame seems to be helping Blizzard with the development of *Brood War*, the quintessential expansion to *Starcraft*. Looking at the city's census data, it probably means that this game was made by Mormons, a religious community renown for illegally distributing sanitized versions of movies that removes the sexual content and *non-Mormon* parts of popular films. I guess it makes sense to have such a sanitized James Bond game made by a developer based in a predominantly Mormon city.

There were many ways the developers at Saffire could pull off a James Bond game. Many decisions they had to make to turn an idea into a complete product. They could have done a sidescroller, like *Mega Man* or *Contra* to bank on Bond's

riveting action. They could have done a visual novel to highlight his fun stories, or a driving shoot-em-up like *Spy Hunter* to showcase his driving abilities. They instead chose to portray the biggest time waste in all James Bond stories: James walks around doing spy stuff. To portray that they went with a top-down adventure view, very similar to what you saw in *The Legend of Zelda*.

For some strange reason they ended up not having the same symmetry in all four directions. In every *Zelda* game, whether you move up or down changes nothing to your walking or attack speed. It makes no sense on a geographical plane, mind you, since you're seen from an angle but the world operates on a perfect top-down but it makes sense intuitively. With this game, when James Bond is moving horizontally, he's fast on the trigger, zippy and fun to control. When moving vertically though, he is slower all around. You always feel like James is going up a steep hill, even when going down. Bashing with the scimitar is noticeably slower, shooting your guns has extra frames of animation and this ultimately forces you to optimize; you'll constantly try to position enemies so you can attack them from the sides where you're faster than them. More dangerous.



James Bond never faces evil face on. He faces it . . . sideways.

That was in spite of this major quirk an interesting choice. I might have Stockholm Syndrome about crappy Game Boy titles, but to me it feels like it ultimately makes the game

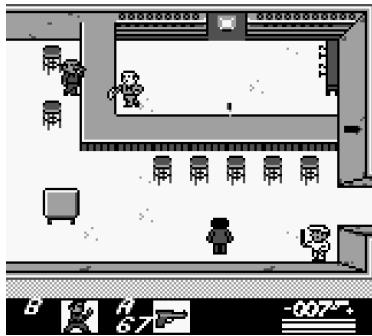
more interesting. It forces you to consider your angle when attacking enemies. You need to be seen by enemies before they start attacking you, so you always have time to survey their placement when going to a new screen. This allows you to stop for a second to plan an angle of attack and select a weapon. It adds just enough strategy to your enemy encounters.



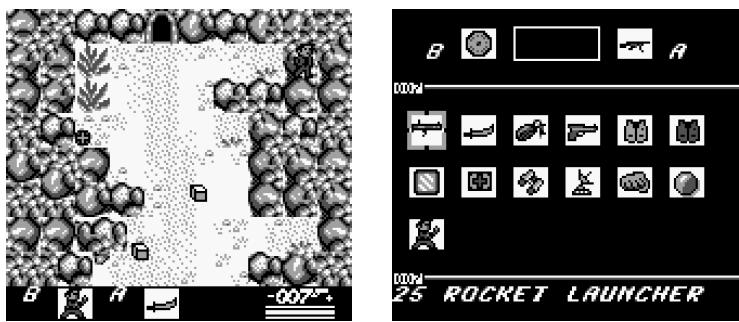
The game seems to imply that *Kurdistan* is a country, which must not have been well received in Turkey. Look it up.

So the top-down view is similar to *Zelda* but don't mistake the overarching structure of the game for a *Zelda* clone though. The game features levels, with no backtracking between them. After all, James Bond never goes to Istanbul in his movies and then exclaims *Wait a minute, let me go back to Beirut and use that laser pen I just found here to open the locked door I saw back there*. James always moves forward. It doesn't mean that within levels you'll never backtrack. You will have little adventure-style puzzles to solve by talking to different people and trying different permutations of objects. The game starts with a very good example: a saccharine fetch quest forces you to search beds in multiple houses to find a hammer to repair a bridge to proceed. It's basically a tutorial, a way to prepare you for what's ahead.

On a more inspired note, the third level has a guard who will not let you pass through a door. Do you bribe him? Shoot him? Sleep with him? No, you shoot the light with your gun



and walk past him once it's dark. The game has many of those quirky little fetch quest adapting James Bond tropes. In Marrakech, you very clearly have sex with a brothel's Madame to get a diamond, which you exchange for a tranquillizer gun to steal hotel keys from a casino patron who works for the villains. Yes indeed: you have to go to a casino and play card games. *Goldeneye 007* on N64 focuses on James Bond as a cold-blooded killer with cool guns. *James Bond 007* on Game Boy focuses on James Bond as an aging misogynist who blows government money in casinos to score with women young enough to be his daughter. You know, the good stuff!



Next comes the matter of item drops. Half of the game is an amalgam of fetch quest puzzles, but the other half is combat. When you kill an enemy, it will sometimes drop a box. Item drops might sound like a simple concept with lit-

tle impact on the overarching game but when the game is as simple as this one, it amounts to everything. Here, enemies drop less ammo than what is needed to kill them, and your pockets aren't deep enough to build a sizeable reserve of bullets. It means you can easily run out of ammo. This means you'll fight using the machete you initially acquire to cut bushes. The machete also kicks enemies back when you hit them with it, giving you spatial control over your enemies. The guns will only stop them for a moment with no kick-back, and when you're fighting three mooks at a time, spatial control is more important than ranged damage. There's also this very unconscious mashing of the machete that will help you: when you mash the sword's button you can more easily hit your enemies the moment they leave their invincibility frames. You can't fire the guns by mashing the button in contrast. You'll run out of valuable ammo and guns have longer animations that need to finish between shots. So by lax design, the sword, not the gun, is the best weapon in a James Bond game. But once you find the machine gun, the grenades, the rocket launcher in Tibet, you can start switching it up because you have more options. I would use the best weapon I had until I was out of ammo, switch to the next best and so on and by the time I had cycled through all the weapons I had found a nice amount of ammo for the first one so I could start using it again. So you have a weapon cycle. It makes the game more fun. Couple that with conservative health drops which keep the game tough but fair and you have reasonably complex combat strategies on Game Boy. It's not much when compared to our modern sensibilities, but it's *something*.

The cherry on top of the whole enterprise is the soundtrack. It's got all the trappings of a James Bond soundtrack, featuring a lot of variations on the classic James Bond theme, just like the movies. It's not too repetitive, with a good number of tracks, and it somehow sounds like it was made by a



European chiptune composer when it actually wasn't. European video game composers who initially worked on British micros like the ZX Spectrum have developed a different musical approach than American or Japanese composers informed by the peculiarities of the sound chips of those micros. A good example of that difference would be the NES game *Silver Surfer*. Its music sounds totally alien to the NES.

With all we've discussed so far, you have the solid baseline of a somewhat competent game. You can build a solid number of levels from that baseline.

## Exploring the Game's Levels



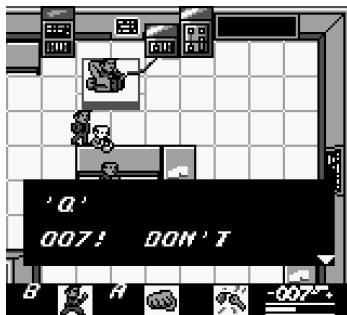
You start in China, with only your fists as weapons. In video game terms, it's a tutorial level, with very easy versions of more complex things to come. You have simple combat, a couple of very dumb puzzles, you find hidden documents, everything to sell you on the idea of the game. In movie terms though, it's the cold-open action scene that feels like a Kung Fu homage. You beat up guys in Gi to

get to their boss, Zhong Mae, who also turns out to be the Bond girl of the game and then you flee on a boat. It feels like a section ripped from *You Only Live Twice*.

You go back to MI6, unfortunately **without** being treated to a credit sequence rendered on Game Boy. Most of everything that happens in MI6 is straight out of the Sean Connery/Roger Moore classic James Bond films. You talk to Moneypenny who pines over you but *knows* she should know better, you get your orders from M who badgers you because he secretly knows you're the bigger man, and you grab your gadgets from Q, who's just had it with your constant bullshit. They managed to convey all those classic movie interactions on Game Boy. That's where I started realizing that this wasn't just a James Bond game, it's a James Bond **love letter**. In Q's laboratory, there's a guy who shows you he has a trap sofa in which he can hide, and there's a rocket-powered couch that you can fiddle with that then propels against a wall, obviously mangling the lab technician sitting on it. Q's team has shifted its focus to spy upholstery! They really gave it their best to try and recreate the funny moments you get from the best Q scenes.

You then go to Kurdistan, where you get to do a bit of everything that the game has to offer. You have a trading sequence to get access to a bar, you shoot dudes with swords and get a sword of your own, and you fight a boss at the end, beating him with electrified keys you were given by Q.

The next section is Marrakech, which is obviously the main draw of the game. They were clearly trying to emulate movie moments like the first act of *Dr. No*. You have a lot of things to do here, and you could easily spend half





your playtime in this section your first time around. You have multiple trading sequences that make no sense (let's trade a roasted chicken for a cat?) and your first goal is to attract a high roller at the baccarat table who works for Oddjob. You want his hotel key so you shoot him with a tranquillizer gun from a little opening in the casino wall that you access from the sewers underneath the black market. It's all clearly inspired by the plot to steal the Lektor from the Russian Embassy in *From Russia With Love*. It all ends with you being captured by Oddjob (wasn't he dead by electrocution at the end of *Goldfinger* by the way?) who then throws you without your items in the Sahara Desert. Oh by the way, Oddjob totally talks in this game when his whole deal in *Goldfinger* was that he didn't speak. There's an electronics store in Marrakech, before you get to the desert, which sells the satellite link. It's kind of a crappy GPS. It just tells you which screen you're on, nothing more. It is not mandatory to get it, you can completely ignore it and the way Marrakech is built with its weird copy-pasted tunnels, you can very easily miss it. And not having the satellite link to help you figure out the desert's layout can really screw you in the Sahara after Marrakech.