NES WORKS

VOLUME III
1987

A comprehensive retrospective look at every game published for the Nintendo Entertainment System in the U.S. in 1987.

Based on the YouTube video series NES Works (which began life as "Good Nintentions," but we're well past that now).

Printed in PRC

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FOREWORD

This third volume in the *NES Works* series ended up being considerably more substantial than I had originally anticipated. Upon consideration, though, that seems only fitting. After all, 1987 was the breakout year for the NES, the year the system went from being a little novelty that one of your classmates owned to *the* must-have gift for that year's holiday season. I can speak to that fact myself: I desperately wanted an NES for Christmas that year, but they simply couldn't be found in stores for months. My own personal NES saga begins a few months later, in early 1988, when my father found the first signs of the nationwide NES restock while traveling out-of-state for a funeral and brought it home to me. And yet, when I look back at my early NES memories, I feel a deep connection to the games of 1987. This was the software that was available for my new console, the carts my friends traded and lent to me, the first games I bought with my own money. I'd play most of the best releases of 1988 as they came along, too, but in the early months when the one game I owned for my NES was the *Super Mario Bros.* cart that came packed in with the system, my friends' 1987 lineup built my video game vocabulary. It's this personal element that helped me decide the "featured" game for this volume should be *Metroid* rather than the more obvious *The Legend of Zelda*. The *Zelda* video whose script was adapted for this volume's text entry is, by an enormous factor, the most popular and viewed video I've ever produced, which speaks to that game's impact and importance. And yet, for me personally, nothing compares to *Metroid*, the first game I bought for my NES and my introduction to the idea that games need not be simple score-chase challenges, that they could present worlds and persistence to get lost in. No game has done more to shape my tastes than *Metroid*. I try to minimize my use of first-person remarks and references in these books, but my views and opinions inevitably shape the content. That will never be more true than in this volume, which contains a vital milestone in my personal gaming experiences. But I love many of these other games just as much as I do *Metroid*: *Zelda*, of course, but also *The Goonies II*, *Castlevania*, *Rygar*, *Mega Man*... the list goes on. What an extraordinary year for the NES—and, for that matter, for the maturation of video games as a whole.

Jeremy Parish
January 2022

NES WORKS 1987

State-of-the-Art   High Resolution Graphics

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One Megabit Memory

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TROJAN

A MAGNUM-SIZED CHALLENGE

Capcom's *Trojan* got its start in arcades, and it was designed around a control scheme involving a joystick and two buttons. While the D-pad design the NES borrowed from Gunpei Yokoi's Game & Watch handhelds turned out to be one of the single greatest video game interface inventions of time, D-pads aren't perfect for every use case, and *Trojan* is one of those cases. Like the fighting games that would be making Capcom filthy rich half a decade after *Trojan*'s debut, this is a game in which the melee combat mechanics demand the use of all available face buttons. Which means that when you want to jump, you have to press up.

The *Super Mario Bros.* control scheme would become a standard fixture on the NES and beyond: A to jump and B to perform other actions. But it was never a one-size-fits-all solution, especially on a console with a two-button controller—and *Trojan* isn't a platformer, so it doesn't require the fluid jump mechanics of a *Mario* or *Adventure Island*. Rather than following in the footsteps of *Super Mario Bros.*, *Trojan* hearkens back to a different NES launch title, being Capcom's take on Irem's *Kung Fu*, all the way down to the dual-height combat mechanics and the guys who like to lurk just out of range peppering you with throwing knives [see *NES Works Vol. I*].

It's a hard-as-hell game, but a solid one as long you can stomach the steep difficulty level. Brutal difficulty aside, *Trojan* makes a perfect starting point for NES's 1987 library. 1985 and '86 were, as we've seen, the console's awkward baby steps into America. 1986 in particular had been a fairly unremarkable year for the console—it mostly consisted of fun but dated arcade conversions, clumsy third-party works, and a handful of classics. The entire year basically functioned as a run-up to the excellent *Gradius*, Konami's NES debut and an excellent arcade conversion. *Trojan* is pretty similar in quality, scope, and difficulty to *Gradius*, and as the console's sole February 1987 release, it's the very first game for the year. Which is to say that 1987 starts as well as 1986 ended, and it only gets better from here, with landmark games like *Metroid*, *The Legend of Zelda*, and *Mike Tyson's Punch-Out!!* appearing in the latter half of a year capped by the debut of the extraordinary platform shooter *Mega Man*.

1987 was the year the NES became a heavy-hitter. It's the year published Capcom did, too, bookending the year with Trojan and *Mega Man*. *Trojan* is notable for being arguably the final Capcom arcade to NES conversion to attempt bringing the coin-op source material to that console in a strictly faithful fashion. As with *Commando* [see *NES Works Vol. II*], it takes a few liberties, but for the most part this is a scaled-down rendition of its big arcade sibling. Beginning with *Section-Z* in July, Capcom would make a habit of wildly reinventing their arcade ports for NES, generally to excellent effect. That process took time, and Trojan was only the second NES release developed internally at the company (their previous NES conversions having been outsourced to Micronics). Needless to say, the company was still developing sea legs, as it were.

While *Trojan* holds up pretty well and is easily the most visually polished and detailed game we've yet seen on NES, you can see the code struggling to keep up. It has a slightly glitchy vibe to it, with occasional flickers in which the screen more or less blanks out and does weird things, like drawing the upper status display in the middle of the screen for a frame or two. In fairness, there's a lot going on here, and this predates the era of advanced memory mapper chips, so you can perhaps forgive the game's occasional shakiness.

Trojan takes the *Kung-Fu* concept and runs with it, incorporating more enemies and giving the player more complex combat options. Where *Kung-Fu* allowed you to punch and kick while standing, jumping, or dodging, *Trojan* throws another option into the mix: Blocking. By default, your protagonist—known here as the Trojan Warrior—wields a sword and shield, which is why you have to press up to jump. You attack foes with B, swinging your sword either at chest level, by attacking from a neutral stance, or low, by ducking first. Equally important is your ability to block, which you do by raising your shield with A. The shield can block just about any manner of projectile the enemies toss at you, be it a knife or a throwing axe. It can also defend the hero from blade attacks. The high/low strike-and-block setup here would show up in many other games, including Nintendo's own *Zelda II: The Adventure of Link* [see *NES Works Vol. IV*].

You can't simply cower behind your shield all the time, though. It's not an impregnable defense, and some enemies to have the ability to circumvent it. Those attacks don't just break your defense; they completely disarm the Trojan Warrior. Stripped of his gear, your hero

fights a lot like *Kung-Fu*'s protagonist, punching and kicking his way through the enemy throngs. Thankfully, the game gives you many opportunities to rearm yourself, which is good; life without a shield can be short, nasty, and brutish in this post-apocalyptic hellscape. A great many enemies chuck projectiles at you, and the fast pace of the action makes it difficult to get through just by ducking and jumping.

As in *Kung-Fu*, enemies appear in endless, rapid succession. Standard enemy soldiers just walk up stupidly and attack, but they attack in ceaseless waves and can be a dangerous distraction while more complex foes strike... or vice-versa. You have to contend with knife-throwers who also like to toss grenades that strip the Trojan Warrior's gear, goblins who leap around and toss spikes balls that sometimes explode into trios of tiny bats, and annoying aerial monsters that pepper you with bombs.

Trojan takes place in an extremely *Fist of the North Star*-inspired ruin of modern civilization [see *Game Boy Works Vol. I*], and the player's progression is charted through a *Ghost 'N Goblins*-style stage map that traces your descent into the lair of the evil warlord Achilles. Interestingly, the flow of levels greatly resembles that of *Double Dragon* [see *NES Works Vol. IV*], another *Fist of the North Star*-derived brawler that would hit NES about a year and a half after *Trojan*. You begin in the shattered ruin of a modern city, complete with the husk of a Volkswagen Bug in the background; advance through an empty wasteland; and eventually make your way into an interior space that ultimately leads to the bricked-out lair of the villain. The NES manual doesn't really explain the story, but this is yet another or those mid-'80s creations whose bombed-out futuristic setting speaks to the nuclear paranoia of the Cold War's final years.

Even if the setting feels like standard fare for the era, its *Kung-Fu* elements, at least, aren't so much a matter of influence as legitimate heritage. *Trojan* was designed by none other than Takashi Nishiyama, who had created *Kung-Fu* at Irem before moving along to Capcom.

It's also worth noting that the home port of this game adds a player-versus-player proto-fighting game mode, which Nishiyama would follow up not long after with a little thing called *Street Fighter*.

This is, at heart, a short and fairly simple game; its length is stretched considerably by its unrelenting difficulty. And honestly, the game probably wouldn't be *that* hard if it had granted players even a smidgen of mercy invincibility; you have no grace period after the Trojan Warrior takes damage, so it's all too common to find yourself in a situation where a gang of enemies reduce health by half in a matter of seconds. It doesn't help that the bosses can be frustratingly unfair. The main boss of the first stage is a bit of a make-or-break point—called Iron Arm, he can launch multiple rocket-powered fists that fly at the player before boomeranging back. If you can't counter his relentless barrage of rocket fists, you certainly don't have much hope against the challenges ahead.

Iron Arm is nothing compared to the utterly horrible second boss, a barbarian called Muscular, who swings a massive club that dings the player for multiple points of damage with each strike. Not only does he hit hard, he has greater attack range than the Trojan Warrior, making it incredibly difficult to take him down. Ironically, the two bosses you'd expect to be the hardest have the easiest patterns to learn. Both the final boss, Achilles, and your evil mirror counterpart—also called Trojan—possess the same skills as the hero: They can strike with a sword and block attacks. Achilles presents a slightly greater danger, as he carries a huge sword that doubles as his shield and gives him more range than the protagonist's sword. But it turns out both of these evil selves can be defeated by the complex strategy of performing repeated jumping attacks at them.

Given how infuriating the rest of the game can be, though, it's kind of nice to have a relatively simple tactic available for a few foes. There are some memorably nasty levels here, such as the journey down a series of elevators in which you have to advance while being

crowded by infinite swarms of increasingly horrible bad guys. Don't even ask about the final stage, in which you're endlessly harassed by ground-based mooks while flying and leaping enemies harass you with projectiles from above. Sure, you can raise your shield to defend yourself from the aerial threats, but chances are you're gonna get sucker-punched by the footsoldiers while you do.

66 TROJAN SET THE STAGE FOR A STELLAR 1987

Still, you can see some movement toward complexity of game design in the key-centric stage leading up to the boss' lair. Here, you have to hunt down keys to unlock barriers; each one is acquired in a different way, and there's the tiniest amount of backtracking once you get them. Also noteworthy are the underground oubliettes, which call back to the hidden coin rooms in *Super Mario Bros.* and secret subterranean passages in *Commando*. When you take out the snipers who pop up from manholes in the ground, you can drop into the sewers they guard and hunt for bonuses. Each sewer consists of a single room guarded by a weaker form of a stage boss. Once they're eliminated, you can hunt for bonuses. At the most basic level, you'll find bonus points by liberating rats, apparently. But much more valuable are the power-ups. Most of the time, you'll find a pair of high-jump boots that allow you to leap to the top of the screen, which can be a huge help for taking out snipers in upper windows or flying bombardiers. But there are also health refills, and occasionally you'll even come across a "P" icon.

The "P" icon doubles the power of your sword attacks; better yet, if you can survive long enough to collect multiples, they stack. Snagging a hidden power-up or two can make the game far more survivable—especially if you want to play "fair" by not using the secret built-in continue feature at game over. All told, this is a pretty solid little arcade conversion—definitely brutal, but look at how artful and complex it is compared to pretty much everything to have appeared on NES to this point! Capcom blew the door open to 1987, setting the stage for the ascendency of one of the greatest and most influential consoles of all time.

While *Trojan* is nobody's favorite and practically never shows up on best-of-NES lists, that's no knock against the game, really. It's just that so much of what came after was so much better that *Trojan* tends to fade from memory. That speaks well to the NES, but it's nice to look back and see forgotten works like this and consider how they paved the way for the greats.

Incidentally, while Takashi Nishiyama designed the arcade version of *Trojan*, the home version wasn't his baby the way Tokuro Fujiwara appears to have overseen both arcade and NES versions of *Commando*. Instead, *Trojan* received its home port largely thanks to the efforts of a young designer in Capcom's fledgeling home division: A guy named Akira Kitamura. Kitamura was responsible not only for redrawing the graphics to retain the arcade version's general vibe on less powerful hardware, but also for implementing changes like the underground rooms, adding the encounter with the two flail-swinging penultimate bosses, and replacing the arcade game's strange environmental jump-pad spots with the character-based high-jump boot power-up. It's a great conversion, and it was headed up almost entirely by Kitamura.

Kitamura, of course, would make his mark in a more meaningful way before too long by heading up the game, character, level, and visual design on—that's right—*Mega Man*. So it's not just Capcom bookending NES in 1987, it's very specifically Kitamura, making him the year's video game MVP.

Special thanks to @whoiscapcom (Twitter).

Panel 1 (top-left):
PLAYER 1   HI   PLAYER 2
        20000   0
TIME =200   PLAYER ■■■■■■
PLAYER = 02 ENEMY

LET'S TRY
THE FIRST STAGE

GOOD LUCK!

Panel 2 (top-right):
PLAYER 1   HI   PLAYER 2
    3500   37100   0
TIME =165   PLAYER ■■■■■■
PLAYER = 02 ENEMY ■■■■■

Panel 3 (middle-left):
PLAYER 1   HI   PLAYER 2
    1650   37100   0
TIME =200   PLAYER ■■■■
PLAYER = 01 ENEMY ■■■■

Panel 4 (middle-right):
PLAYER 1   HI   PLAYER 2
  105550   105550   0
TIME =154   PLAYER ■■■■■■
PLAYER = 09 ENEMY ■■■■■

Panel 5 (bottom-left):
PLAYER 1   HI   PLAYER 2
  126500   126500   0
TIME =142   PLAYER ■
PLAYER = 08 ENEMY

Panel 6 (bottom-right):
PLAYER 1   HI   PLAYER 2
  145600   145600   0
TIME =195   PLAYER ■■■■■
PLAYER = 07 ENEMY ■■■■■

THE PISTON RING

For all the long-term, lasting influence Takashi Nishiyama has exerted on the evolution of video game design, his name doesn't carry nearly as much household recognition as you might expect. While he deserves a throne in the pantheon of classic gaming alongside the likes of Shigeru Miyamoto and Toru Iwatani, the name "Piston Takashi" only really has clout among devotees of fighting games—a genre he more or less invented by iterating on a few key mechanics through games like *Trojan*.

Nishiyama got his start at Irem and found his initial international success with Moon Patrol, a sort of endless runner precursor that challenged players to gun down alien assailants in two directions while navigating hazardous lunar terrain. Nishiyama would continue to tinker with the shooter genre even after leaving Irem for the greener pastures of Capcom, where he directed the arcade versions of *Section Z* and *Legendary Wings* [see the upcoming *NES Works 1988*]. However, Nishiyama's greatest impact—both literal and metaphorical—tied in with one of his final productions at Irem: *Spartan-X*, better known in the west as *Kung-Fu* [see *NES Works 1985*].

Prior to *Kung-Fu*, fighting and brawling games tended to employ simplistic, brain-dead mechanics and controls. Players would walk, punch, and take unavoidable hits. A simplistic block command might factor in somewhere, especially in games based on boxing, but by and large the prospect of a video game based around martial combat sounded a lot more appealing than the resulting output. About the best the industry had to offer was *Karate Champ* [see NES Works 1986] with its overly complicated dual-stick interface and strict competition-based rule set.

Kung-Fu changed the genre by giving players a broad range of commands and skills while still managing to maintain a snappy pace and make use of a breezy, intuitive control scheme. *Kung-Fu* protagonist Thomas could punch and kick, and he could combine those attack skills with his ability to duck and jump, giving players access to a remarkably array of contextual martial arts options. In addition to his standard standing punches and kicks, Thomas could also land crouching attacks or even deliver punishing blows in midair, making him by far the most versatile martial hero ever seen in a video game to that point. Thomas may have lacked the cinematic grace of

Jordan Mechner's eponymous Karateka [see *Game Boy Works Vol. I*], but what he lacked in fluid animation he more than made up for with rough-and-tumble combat aptitude.
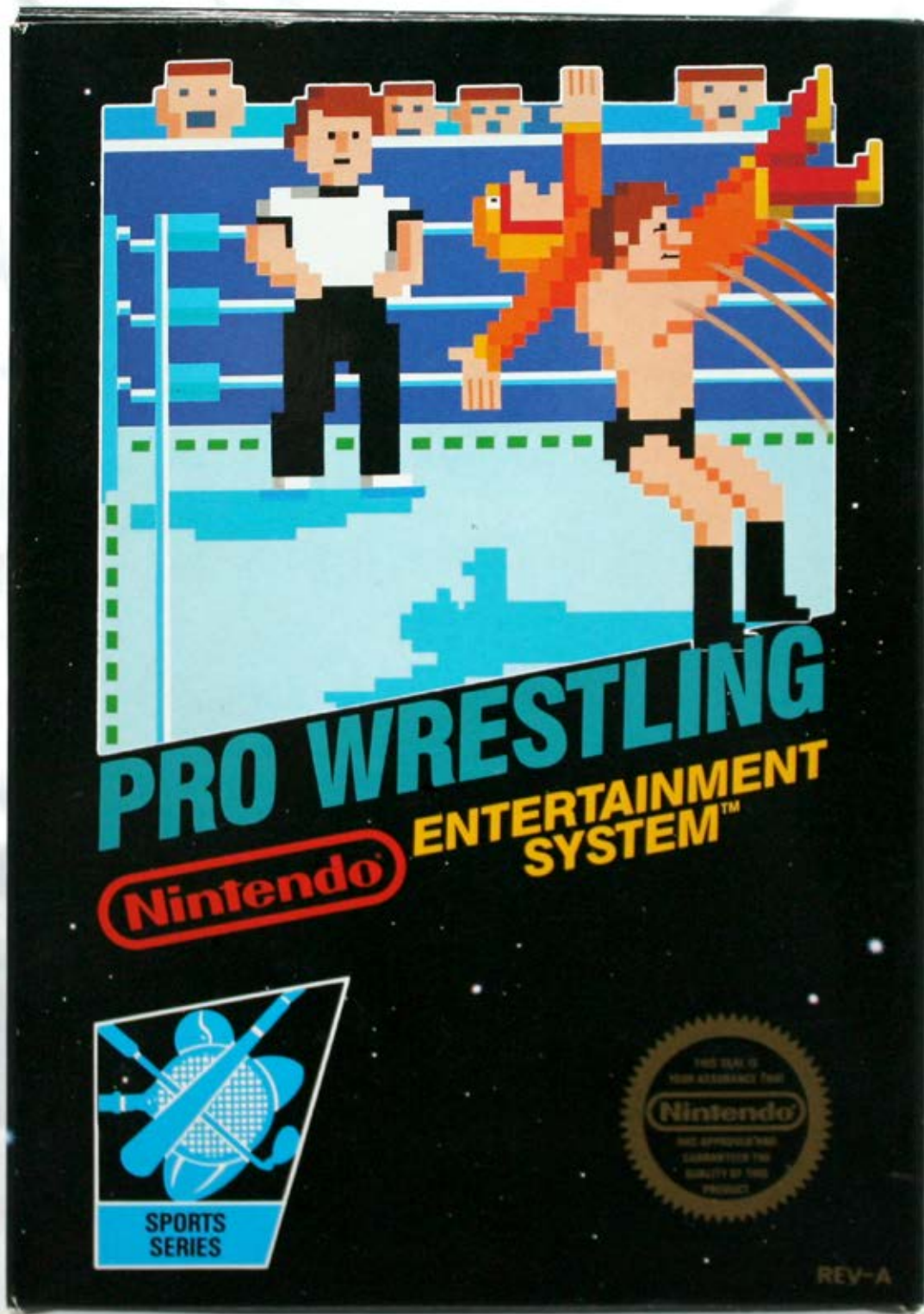
Trojan built on *Kung-Fu*'s combat by integrating a sword and shield into the mix and giving greater strategic weight to the act of taking a flying swipe at bad guys. The connections between the two games become more explicit in the rare instances in which the hero finds himself disarmed by an enemy attack, as a bare-fisted Trojan fights a lot like Thomas—though rather less effectively, since his is a world based on deadlier armed conflict rather than martial arts.

The most memorable conflicts in both *Kung-Fu* and *Trojan* centered on single combat in which those respective protagonists faced off against an equally skilled (and equally durable) foe, and Nishiyama leaned into this fact with his next major project: An arcade brawler called *Street Fighter*. Unlike *Karate Champ*, *Street Fighter* didn't fuss with the rules of a proper martial arts contest, allowing its combatants to make use of all manner of attacks—including some decidedly unrealistic skills. Although *Street Fighter* lacked the finesse of the sequel Capcom would create following Nishiyama's departure for Capcom's cross-town rival SNK, its attack system worked around the same three-height system as *Kung-Fu* and *Trojan*, with the addition of matching defensive postures and the ability to deliver both punches and kicks with three different levels of force.

Nishiyama's efforts would finally come to a head in 1994, when he took the directoral reins of a spin-off from SNK's *Fatal Fury* games, which had played something like an amped-up *Street Fighter*. *The King of Fighters '94* carried forward Nishiyama's combat dynamic, adopts the more streamlined *Fatal Fury* system of weak/strong attacks (versus *Street Fighter*'s more complex weak/medium/strong), integrated an energy meter to allow the tactical integration of special, high-powered skills, and changed the best-of-three match system to a three-on-three team-based setup that gave players greater flexibility during a match but also required them to master multiple characters.

More than 25 years later, nearly all modern fighting or brawling games make use of the mechanics and principles Nishiyama's work established over the course of a decade, beginning with *Kung-Fu*... and *Trojan*, of course.

Kung-Fu [arcade] courtesy of vgmuseum.com

Street Fighter [arcade] courtesy of vgmuseum.com

PRO WRESTLING

LUCHADORABLE

March 1987 brought the NES its *third* wrestling game. If that seems a bit like overkill for a library of such modest size, consider this: *Pro Wrestling* may have been the third wrestling title for the console, but it was the first one actually worth playing.

Pro Wrestling also heralds the end of Nintendo's Black Box series as the first of three final releases clad in that particular iconic branding. This game in particular makes a strong case for first-party branding moving along from that look. The Black Box packaging has become one of gaming's most recognizable retro visual icons—indeed, there's arguably no box art format that is better known or widely parodied, at least in America. Homages to its distinctive design show up on book jackets, T-shirts, homebrew NES games, band posters—you name it. However, the Black Box speaks to a specific era of games, and the NES by 1987 had frankly moved beyond.

The inspiration behind the Black Box approach had real merit in 1985. Nintendo wanted to set its games apart from what had come before, given that for most retailers (and many consumers), the idea of video games was redolent of failure. Rather than cover up early NES releases with fanciful, painted box art that presented a unrealistic impression of what the graphics and gameplay would actually deliver (a tactic commonly seen on Atari and Intellivision), the Black Box design showed you exactly what you were getting. Austere black packaging emblazoned with a faithful (if not entirely accurate) representation of the actual game graphics made sure there were no hurt feelings when kids got home and ended up with something much less exciting than the box suggested.

At the same time, the sprite paintings showed off the NES's power relative to its predecessors. These weren't the primitive stick-men of the Intellivision, oh no! They had color and volume and detail (albeit somewhat less detail than the box art would have you believe). By 1987, the NES had made serious inroads into the U.S. market, and the novelty of seeing a video game system in the wild had already begun to fade. Moreover, games were growing more detailed and complex than the early Black Box launch releases—the elaborate background visuals in *Trojan*, for example, are something you just didn't see in those initial titles, but that level of detail would become standard fare throughout 1987.

And so, the Black Box had served its purpose. *Pro Wrestling*, in its opening moments, underscores that fact—while it kicks off with a simplistic ditty over its title screen (the same ditty heard in several other NES sports games), that jingle was no longer followed by a few seconds of silent demo play as in order releases. Instead, *Pro Wrestling* segues into a hard-rocking musical theme that introduces its cast of wrestlers alongside detailed portraits of the characters. This is a step beyond anything we've seen in a Black Box before in terms of presentation and confidence. Nintendo's first-party software crosses a threshold here, and in doing so *Pro Wrestling* arguably kicks off the second generation of NES releases. (Some may choose to reserve that honor for *Gradius* [see *NES Works Vol. II*]. That's fine; it's not as thought this is some exact science.)

Once you launch the game itself, *Pro Wrestling* turns out to be similarly advanced. It's a vastly better game than *M.U.S.C.L.E.* or *Tag Team Wrestling* [see *NES Works Vol. II*], that's for sure. But then, why wouldn't it be? This is the work of a gaming legend: Masato Masuda, creator of the *Fire ProWrestling* series, and basically gaming's gift to wrestling fans. So far as I'm able to determine, *Pro Wrestling* for NES appears to have been Masuda's first significant work—which would make sense, as he wasn't even 50 years old when he passed away in 2014. He would have been college-aged at the time of *Pro Wrestling*'s debut on Famicom Disk System in late 1986 as *Pro Wrestling: Famicom Wrestling Association*.

The internet offers a few different and slightly conflicting explanations for the exact provenance of *Pro Wrestling*'s creation. Some sources credit the development to a contractor called Try, which would later evolve into Human Entertainment, while Wikipedia makes an unsourced claim that Masuda single-handedly designed and programmed the game as an employee of Nintendo's R&D3 division before departing to join Try. On the other hand, Japanese-literate Famicom history expert Kevin Gifford seems confident that this was a Try joint created under contract, so let's go with that.

Whatever the truth, there's no denying that *Pro Wrestling* represents a huge step forward for the genre. Try (under its later name of Human Entertainment) would produce one of the first-ever Game Boy wrestling titles by way of *HAL Wrestling* [see *Game Boy Works Vol.*

II]. And while these two games are fairly different creations in many of their particulars, *Pro Wrestling* does share a lot in common with that later release.

Rather than attempt to create a perfect interpretation of the sport, *Pro Wrestling* instead captures both the mechanics and the

## "PRO WRESTLING ESTABLISHED A BASELINE FOR ALL WRESTLING GAMES TO COME

pageantry of real-world wrestling far more cannily than any video game that had come before it. Players can choose from six different competitors and work their way up through the ranks by doing all the horrible things a professional wrestler does to his competitors. Grapples, holds, throws, roundhouse kicks, running clotheslines off the ropes, leaping onto a downed opponent from the posts—*Pro Wrestling* has it all. You can even chuck your foe outside of the ring for a potential disqualification.

As with previous NES wrestling games, *Pro Wrestling* revolves around whittling down the opponent's stamina in order to make

them vulnerable to being held down for the count. Its control scheme is vastly more nuanced than that of *M.U.S.C.L.E.*, while at the same time avoiding the idiotic menu scheme of *Tag Team Wrestling*. While Masuda would greatly refine this system for the *Fire Pro* series, he established a solid baseline for the genre here. The biggest shortcoming in this game is that timing doesn't really factor into the action, so it's easy to spam attacks. You definitely see this when facing off against the CPU, which, unsurprisingly, cheats without mercy. It's all too easy to find yourself stuck helplessly in a loop as the computer knocks you down and immediately dominates you once you stand, before you're able to register an input to counter or evade.

To be fair, this isn't really a game meant to be played versus the CPU. Even more so than the other sports games we've seen on NES, *Pro Wrestling* is merely OK as a one-person pastime but absolutely shines in two-player mode. To some degree, this is because 8-bit sports games are always a lot more fun against another than against a limited AI. But it's also because the six wrestlers here are each unique, interesting, and a lot of fun to play as. *Pro Wrestling*'s lineup is what you might call a motley assortment—a strange and nonsensical mix of typical U.S. and Japanese-style pro wrestlers along with a few more colorful characters. There's the bright pink luchador, Starman, and everyone's favorite heel, the bizarre Amazon. Every wrestler employs essentially the same move set, but each one puts his own spin on things. Korean champion Kin Korn Karn, for example, uses karate chops and flying kicks in place of the standard punches and roundhouse kicks.

Of course, everyone loves playing as the Amazon the most, because he's a dirty bastard. Rather than putting opponents into a suplex or other standard hold, the Amazon transitions from grapples to an absolutely painful-looking head bite. He's basically the prototype for *Street Fighter II*'s Blanka, and he's the clearest "heel" wrestler in the game. It's not enough that he's apparently a green-
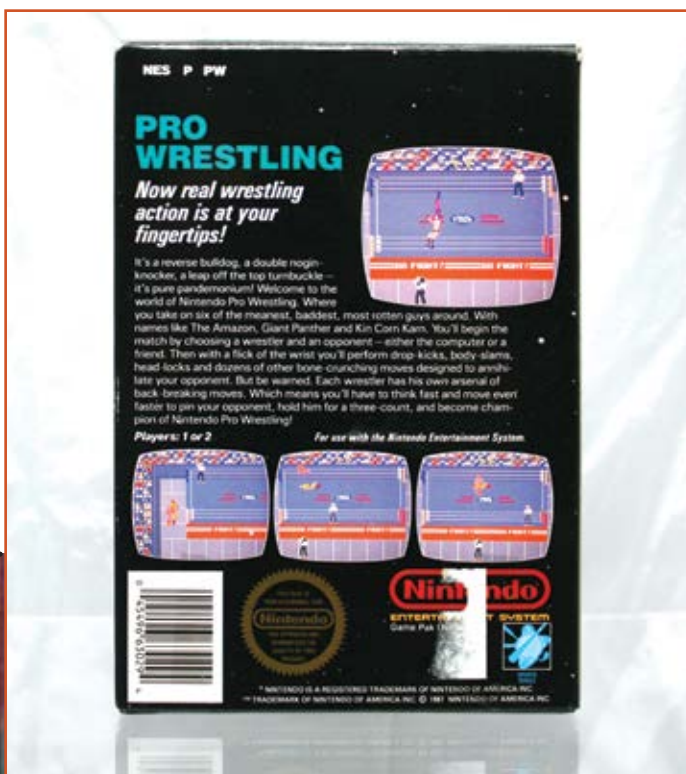
THE MASUDA LEGACY

As Takashi Nishiyama is to fighting games, so Masato Masuda is to the wrestling genre. Wrestling video games existed before Masuda and his team at Try created *Pro Wrestling* for Famicom Disk System, but few (if any) of them offered anything like a convincing or satisfying simulation of the sport-*cum*-soap opera that emerged as a popular entertainment format during the 1970s and '80s. Consider *Tag Team Wrestling* by Technos [see *NES Works 1986*] or *Champion Pro Wrestling* by Sega [see *Segaiden Vol. I*], both of which managed to approximate the look and energy of the sport but played through a series of cumbersome menus rather than allowing players the immediacy of just whalloping the daylights out of an opponent before shifting into a neck hold. *Pro Wrestling* managed to achieve the difficult balancing act of being both convicing and fun simultaneously and established the format of the genre for the future.

Like Nishiyama, Masuda hardly looked the part of a man who would revolutionize a genre about enormous men choking one another into submission, at least not at first glance. Wiry, bespectacled, and slight of build, Masuda had a bookishness about him that sat at odds with the burly sport. But it makes sense that someone who radiated an academic nature and prim manner would possess the quiet enthusiasm for a sport, a deep love and understanding of video games, and the attention to detail necessary to bring those two things together. These elements would stand in even higher relief once Try became Human Entertainment and launched the *Fire ProWrestling* series, which took the wrestling genre to new heights. If *Pro Wrestling* for NES was a breezy backyard exhibition match, all sloppy good-hearted enthusiasm, *Fire ProWrestling* gave players the full professional experience with its immense customization options and career modes.

The *Fire Pro* series never achieved the breakout success it deserved, especially in the West, where it lacked the licensed likenesses of popular figures in the sport. Wrestling games based around the World Wrestling Federation and other organizations became mainstays of the medium during the NES era, but few offered mechanics or play that put them anywhere near the work Masuda and Human pumped out with *Fire Pro*. Nevertheless, the series' influence could be felt in those games, which freely (if inexpertly) borrowed the best ideas from Human's work.

At the same time, *Fire Pro*'s general disconnect from the actual world of recognizable wrestling personalities gave Human a certain liberating degree of freedom. The most recent entry in the series, *Fire ProWrestling World*, contains an exhaustive custom character building system that can be used to make essentially any real-world wrestler you like along with outlandish original characters. And, somewhat famously, *Fire ProWrestling* also gave an aspiring young game writer by the name of Goichi Suda his start in the industry. His writing contributions to *Fire ProWrestling*'s story mode ended with the protagonist taking his own life, a darkly unconventional outcome that would inform much of Suda's work going forward.

Although Human Entertainment dissolved in January 2000 (with the *FirePro* property being absorbed by Spike before being folded into Spike ChunSoft) and Masuda sadly died in 2014 before even reaching the age of 50, the legacy of the man and his creation continue to cast a shadow on the wrestling genre. And works like *Pro Wrestling* continue to transcend their age and technology to remain eminently playable even in the present day.

Fire ProWrestling: Combination Tag [PC Engine] courtesy of vgmuseum.com

Fire ProWrestling 3: Legend Bout [PC Engine] courtesy of vgmuseum.com

Street Fighter [arcade] courtesy of vgmuseum.com

RELEASE CHRONOLOGY
PRO WRESTLING

OCT. 1986...FAMICOM DISK SYSTEM
MARCH 1987...NES [U.S.]
SEPT. 1987..NES [EU]
SEPT. 2018...NINTENDO SWITCH ONLINE

skinned monster, he's also absolutely brutal in the ring. The Amazon's poor dumb rivals, like the obvious tan-and-blond Hulk Hogan proxy Great Panther, never stood a chance. *Pro Wrestling* is a game about five basically normal humans and The Amazon grappling for supremacy.

Even if the Amazon is the obvious star here—yes, despite there being a guy named "Starman"—the game seems determined to make Japanese wrestler Fighter Hayabusa the protagonist. He's the default character in single-player mode, and he's the first CPU opponent you have to fight when you play as any character besides Fighter Hayabusa. Which is fine. This is a Japanese game, so it makes sense to give the local hero top billing. But he's no Amazon.

66 PRO WRESTLING REMAINS AN NES FAVORITE, A MILESTONE IN GAME EVOLUTION

There's some real meat to this game, enough so that even someone who recoils in horror from the sight of professional wrestling can appreciate the fact that it's more than just some superficial take on the sport. As Black Box games go, this is the most substantial one we've seen outside of *Super Mario Bros.*—which makes sense, because it originally debuted in Japan as a Disk System title, meaning it had a lot more memory capacity to work with than something like, say, *Baseball* [see *NES Works Vol. I*].

Pro Wrestling remains one of the most beloved NES releases of this era, and for good reason. The professional wrestling craze hit the U.S. in earnest right around the time *Pro Wrestling* debuted, and this was a colorful, intricate take on the concept by the standards of 1987. So, like *Trojan*, we have here a game that would be done better by others in the future, but which served as essential milestones in the evolution of the NES library. Unlike Trojan, though, *Pro Wrestling* is still the kind of game that's fun to play drunk at a party, which makes it about as close to timeless as you're gonna find in a Black Box game.
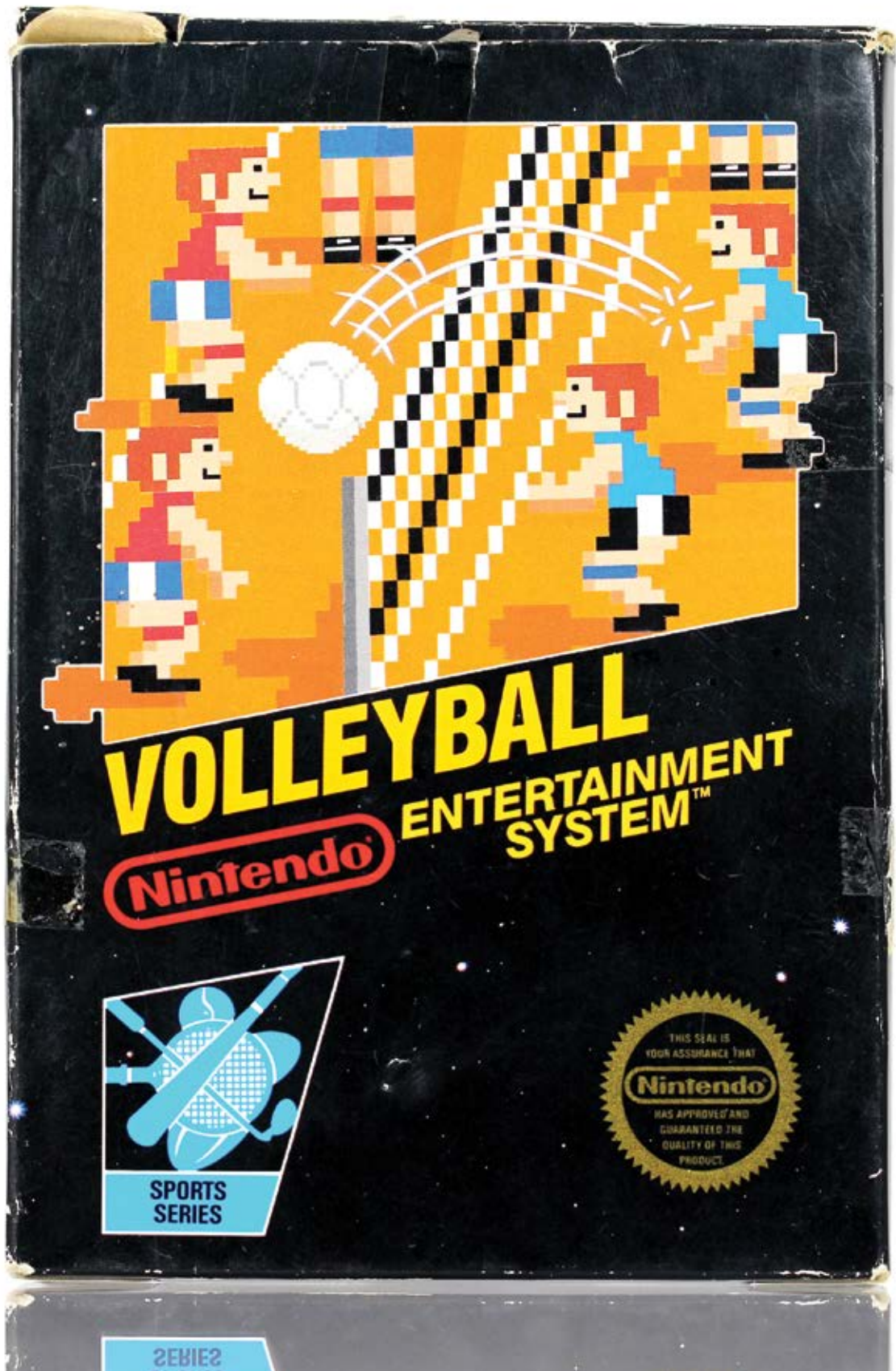
VOLLEYBALL

Developer: **Pax Softnica** | *Publisher*: **Nintendo**
Release date: **July 1986** *[JP]* **March 1987** *[U.S.]* **Nov. 1987** *[EU]*
NES-VB

BALLS OF VOLLEY

Unlike *Soccer*, *Volleyball* actually did ship in the U.S. in March 1987, as Nintendo claims. Also unlike *Soccer* with its five skill-level selection options, *Volleyball* offers only two difficulty levels for play against the computer, and those settings have both been tuned to be crushingly difficult.

Here, you can play as a completely offbeat selection of international teams—obvious Olympic mainstays like the U.S. and Japan, but also dark-horse picks like Tunisia—and no matter which team you select, the computer will destroy you. *Volleyball* is tough because it's fast-paced... but also because the semi-automated gameplay is a mess.

As in *Soccer*, this is a team sport where you only have direct control over a few players at a time. Unlike *Soccer*, though, you have no input over which characters you control. The computer automatically determines which team members fall under your direct input as each turn proceeds, and the process by which this plays out seems decidedly oblique. The hardest part of this game, in fact, is the quirk that causes the players closest to the ball to frequently remain inert, forcing you to send active players scrambling to cover for them.

Generally speaking, of course, *Volleyball* plays like the real-world sport. You send a ball back and forth over a net via, you know, volleys. Your team has three hits in which to get the ball to the other side, and a lot of the game revolves around setting up hard attacks and spikes over the net. Aggressive spikes are weirdly difficult to execute thanks to the timing involved; even the CPU has trouble pulling them off in any consistent fashion.

If you can master the timing, however, spikes are the ultimate tactic for this game. Thanks to the clumsy controls and the way the ball movement can be difficult to predict perfectly, a hard overhand return is pretty much unstoppable.

Not much about this game particularly stands out. Perhaps its most notable feature is that, aside from the semi-apocryphal, *Ladies Golf*, this is the only NES Black Box sports title to allow you to play with female avatars. The default team here is women, though men's volleyball is also available as a sort of "hard mode" option—the equivalent of "Game B" in other Black Box releases.
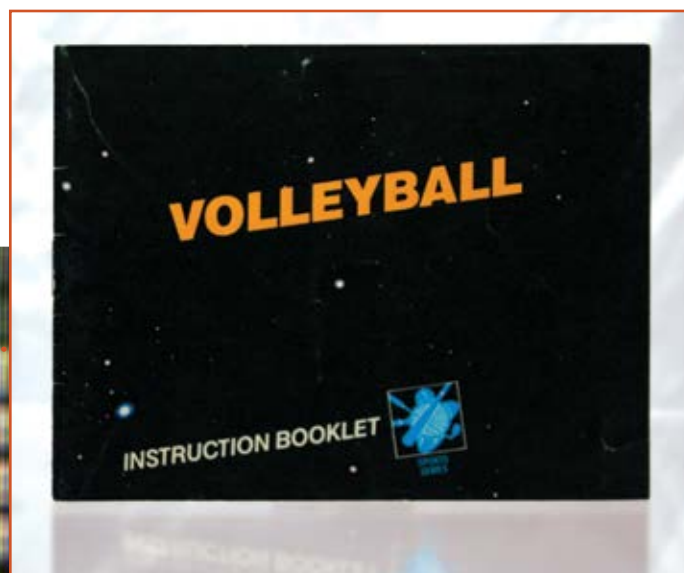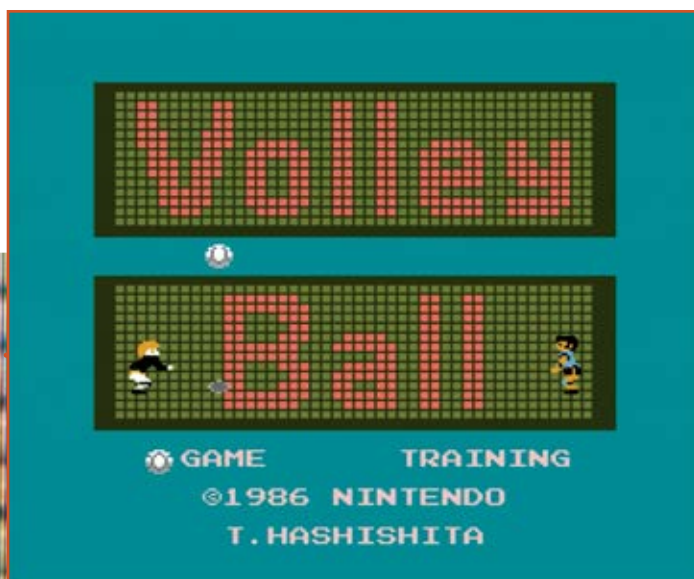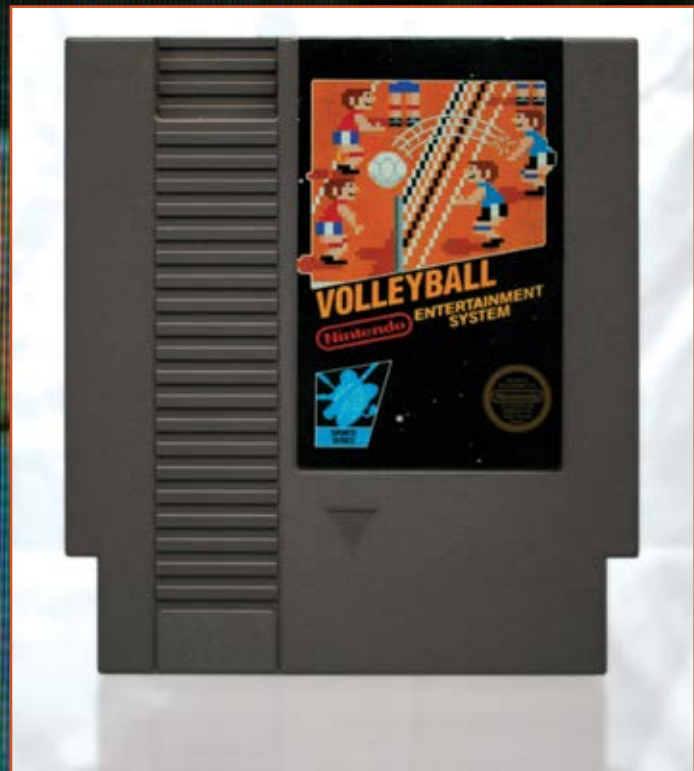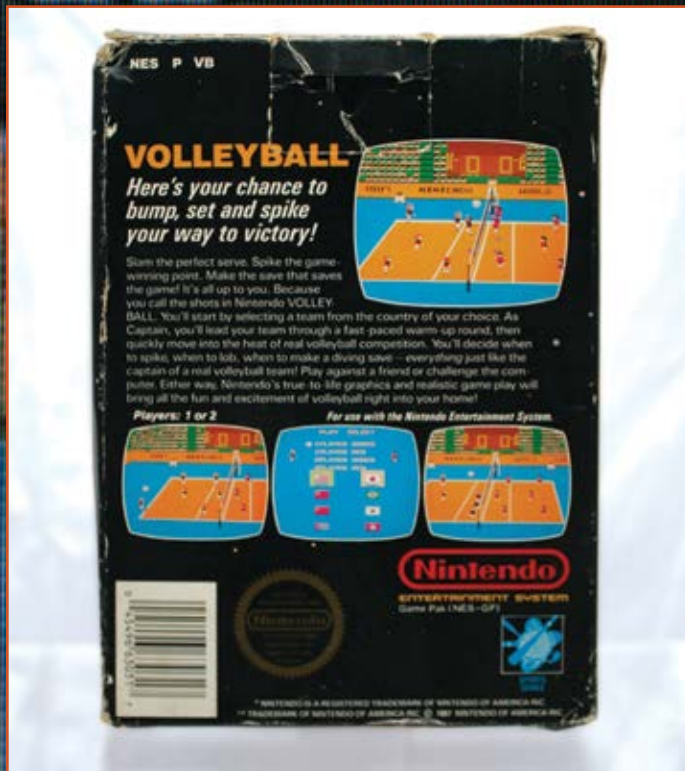
It's difficult to recommend playing as men, though. That's not a matter of sexism, simply a factor of the in-game animation. The two-frame idle animation for players appears as a kind of cute little butt-wiggle for the ladies, but it somehow becomes a frankly obscene-looking pelvic thrust for the men's teams.

Somewhat less notable than its somewhat offputting gender mix is that *Volleyball* marks, to my knowledge, the NES debut of developer Pax Softnica. Pax Softnica would contribute multiple titles to the Nintendo Game Boy pantheon, having handled (for example) the heavy lifting on the wonderful *Balloon Kid* [see *Game Boy Works Vol. I*]. *Volleyball* marks the beginning of their 15-year relationship as a Nintendo development partner, *a la* HAL and Minakuchi Engineering. Interestingly, the company's programmer (Tomoshige Hashishita) gets a credit on the title screen here, which is quite unusual—you never saw individuals credited on the title screen to first-party NES games.

As with *Pro Wrestling*, *Volleyball* debuted in Japan as a Disk System title, but it seems to have made its way to cartridge with no particular compromises (unlike many of the Disk System-to-NES conversions that would follow throughout 1987).

Outside of these ephemeral notes regarding the circumstances and trivia of its creation, there's not a lot to say about *Volleyball* as a game. It doesn't do anything to make itself stand out in a sea of mediocre 8-bit sports games outside of exploring a fairly unpopular sport, and it has no particular place of importance in the NES catalog. If not for the fact that it marked the NES debut of Pax Softnica and the first-ever conversion from the Disk System platform into cartridge format, there would be almost nothing remarkable about this release in any respect. It's the sort of game whose time was rapidly coming to an end on NES as the system's 1987 lineup took shape and a new wave of deeper, prettier, more substantial software begins to crash against the shores of video game history.

NES P VB

VOLLEYBALL

Here's your chance to bump, set and spike your way to victory!

Slam the perfect serve. Spike the game-winning point. Make the save that saves the game! It's all up to you. Because you call the shots in Nintendo VOLLEY-BALL. You'll start by selecting a team from the country of your choice. As Captain, you'll lead your team through a fast-paced warm-up round, then quickly move into the heat of real volleyball competition. You'll decide when to spike, when to lob, when to make a diving save – everything just like the captain of a real volleyball team! Play against a friend or challenge the computer. Either way, Nintendo's true-to-life graphics and realistic game play will bring all the fun and excitement of volleyball right into your home!

Players: 1 or 2   For use with the Nintendo Entertainment System

Nintendo
ENTERTAINMENT SYSTEM
Game Pak (NES-GF)

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VOLLEYBALL
ENTERTAINMENT SYSTEM
Nintendo
SPORTS SERIES

1987 NINTENDO WORLD

NINTENDO WORLD CUP

PAX SOFTNICA & NINTENDO

Although only the hardest of hardcore game fanatics will likely recognize the name Pax Softnica, the studio has had its hands on some of Nintendo's most visible properties. Established as a computer development studio in 1983, Pax Softnica pivoted to creating games for the MSX computer soon after but quickly became one of Nintendo's go-to houses for assistance on first-party releases (primarily for Famicom and Game Boy). Unlike Intelligent Systems, the other tiny studio that got its start making 1986 Disk System releases for Nintendo that would find their way to NES a year later, Pax Softnica didn't last as a first-party mainstay; the company rebranded as Softnica in 2003 and now primarily works in educational software for the Chinese market.

Girl Jack | *FM-7, 1983*
Despite being a company destined to work for family-friendly Nintendo, Pax Softnica got its start with adult-oriented (read: packed with softcore erotica) gambling games.

Volleyball | Disk System/NES, 1986
Perhaps the bum-wiggling ladies in this otherwise prim sport sim could be seen as a final last tribute to the studio's soft-porn origins.

Ice Hockey | Disk System/NES, 1988
Arguably the most playable arcade-style hockey title ever thanks to intuitively classing its team members' performance attributes according to those character's weight and build [see *NES Works 1988*].

Vs. Excitebike | Disk System, 1988
A greatly expanded take on the NES racer that incorporated two-player competitive action and an expanded track editor.

Earth Bound | Famicom, 1989
Nintendo's answer to *Dragon Quest*, penned by offbeat author Shigesato Itoi, and followed by Super NES masterpiece *EarthBound*.

Balloon Kid/Hello Kitty World | Game Boy, 1990/Famicom, 1992
A greatly expanded overhaul of *Balloon Fight*'s Balloon Trip, also available in a Hello Kitty variant. [See *Game Boy Works Vol. II*]

Wave Race | Game Boy, 1992
A top-down jet ski racer. A fairly mundane game that would set the stage for a brilliant Nintendo 64 sequel.

Donkey Kong | Game Boy, 1994
Seemingly a straight adaptation of the vintage arcade game that quickly reveals itself to be a brilliant, 100-stage action puzzler.
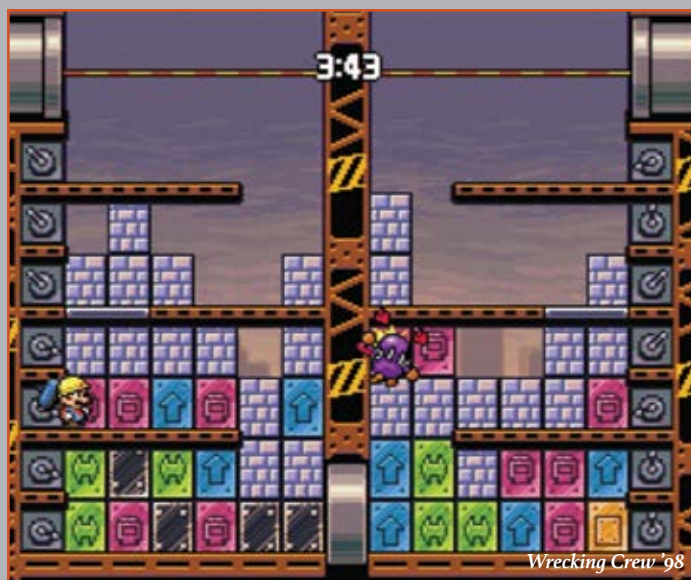
Mole Mania | Game Boy, 1996
A charming puzzle game, timed to take advantage of Game Boy's sudden resurgence of popularity in the wake of *Pokémon*.

Wrecking Crew '98 | Super NES, 1998
An esoteric reworking of the 1985 puzzler into a fresher take on the genre inspired by *Panel de Pon*.

Balloon Kid [see Game Boy Works 1990]

Wrecking Crew '98

Ice Hockey [see NES Works 1988]

SLALOM™

Nintendo® ENTERTAINMENT SYSTEM

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SPORTS SERIES

SLALOM

Developer: **Rare Coin-It** | *Publisher:* **Nintendo**
Release date: **March 1987** *[U.S.]* **Oct. 1987** *[EU]*
NES-SL

NO IFS, ANDS, OR BUTTS

Slalom encompasses two important historic moments at once for the NES, and this isn't just some case of making milestones out of moguls, either.

First, as a Nintendo-published release, *Slalom* would be the final game to wear the iconic Black Box branding. Nintendo wouldn't totally abandon their trademark box art format, but future games to work from this primal NES packaging style will take a more visually distinct approach to things.

Yet even as we bid farewell to one NES icon, we say hello to another. *Slalom* is the first NES game to be developed by a western studio—and not just any western studio, but very specifically Rare Inc. Based in the U.K., Rare got its foot in the NES's proverbial door before any other non-Japanese developer by, well, cheating. Their early entrée into the platform gave them a huge advantage over other American and European studios, as they had a year's head start on grappling with the console's technical peculiarities. Unsurprisingly, the company would go on to become the single most prolific developer for the platform outside of the ubiquitous TOSE, ultimately producing something like four dozen games in total for NES as both original creations and works-for-hire commissioned by other publishers. For the next 15 years—right up until Microsoft bought the company in 2002—Rare easily ranked among the top three development partners for Nintendo. That history begins here.

Even before it hit the NES, *Slalom* was clearly special. Like a lot of NES games, it debuted as a Vs. system game before heading to home consoles [see the *Tennis* feature in *NES Works Vol. I*], and the *Vs. Slalom* cabinet stood out from its fellows. The idea behind Nintendo's Vs. Unisystem had been to reduce distribution costs and vendor expenses with a standardized line of cabinets running on conversion-friendly hardware based around the NES board. Yet the *Vs. Slalom* upright was anything but standard, shipping with a ski-shaped foot stand and a pair of controllers design in the style of ski poles—not exactly something you could slap a *Gradius* or *Duck Hunt* ROM into, but definitely memorable.

Rare itself was a developer out of the ordinary. The company had been recently minted back in 1987, arising from the ashes of a powerhouse studio called Ultimate Play the Game, which had established the high-water mark of software design for the U.K.'s ZX Spectrum. By around 1985, Ultimate's bosses realized the Spectrum market had nowhere to go but down and sold off their properties, using that income to reincorporate as Rare. While Rare continued to develop software for 8-bit microcomputers, they also cast their gaze further afield. Those same leaders—a pair of brothers named Chris and Tim Stamper—had the foresight to recognize Nintendo's Famicom as a winner. While Famicom wouldn't reach the U.K. until late 1986 and would never come close to matching the success there its saw in Japan and the U.S., it would prove to be a gold mine for Rare.

"THE NES FARED POORLY IN THE U.K. YET PROVED A GOLDMINE FOR DEVELOPER RARE

Making the transition from local U.K. hero to international besties with Nintendo proved to be a bit of a challenge, though. Nintendo did not, historically, offer a warm embrace to unknown developers, and they refused to take Rare's calls until the studio could prove it knew how to produce software for the system. A ridiculous chicken-and-egg situation to be sure, but Rare wouldn't be deterred. Instead, the company hired some knowledgeable 6502 programmers to help get them up to speed, produced a solid prototype NES game,

and headed back to Kyoto. Impressed, Nintendo brought them on board as an official developer, and together they shipped *Vs. Slalom* in late 1986 or early 1987 (accounts vary), with the NES version arriving in the U.S. a few months later.

66 SLALOM BOTH LOOKS AND PLAYS BETTER THAN MACH RIDER AND F-1 RACE DID

As with a few other Black Box games, like *Soccer* and *Mach Rider* [see *NES Works Vol. II*], different online sources give conflicting dates for *Slalom*'s debut, ranging from March to October of '87. Whatever the actual ship date, this is definitely the final Black Box game, and definitely the first NES title developed outside of Japan. And, as with Pro Wrestling, it's a fair bit more sophisticated than the clunky Black Box games of 1985 and '86. *Slalom*, as the title suggests, involves players racing downhill along snowy slopes. Which is to say that it's a

skiing game, in other words.

Slalom would be the second NES racing game to use a behind-the-racer 3D perspective. Unlike *Mach Rider*, this plays as more of a pure racer—no combat involved. It's the first real NES equivalent to HAL's *F-1 Race* for Famicom, which Nintendo solicited but ultimately chose not to localize for the U.S. under the name *Nintendo 500*. Both games share a similar viewpoint, but *Slalom* does so in a context that Nintendo likely felt would land better with U.S. audiences, skiing being more popular stateside than Formula One racing. It's probably no coincidence that, like *F-1 Race*, *Slalom* hails from a technically proficient third-party developer that would go on to share a close relationship with Nintendo for years to come.

Compared to both *F-1 Race* and *Mach Rider*, *Slalom* looks and plays better. The downhill tilt on the action does a lot to improve playability; it's a fast-paced game, but in a forgiving way. The more traditional road-based racers of the era tended to involve lots of sharp curves at breakneck speeds, providing players with very little reaction time. *Slalom* involves lots of undulating paths and encourages you to accelerate, and it gives ample warning in advance of upcoming hazards. Unlike a race car or combat motorcycle, your little skier can maneuver sharply on the hills, so there's a lot less of the awkward scraping the outside edge of a curve that you get in most 8-bit racers. Plus, there's more personality, since you directly control a little cartoon person rather than a large slab of metal.

Slalom challenges players to conquer three different mountains with 10 courses each. Each mountain begins with a basic qualifying course before moving on to more challenging scenarios. Snowy Hill contains the most basic set of courses, with Steep Peak upping the complexity, and the suitably named Mt. Nasty posting the

RELEASE CHRONOLOGY
SLALOM

OCT. 1986..ARCADE [VS. SLALOM]
AUG. 1987 ....NES [U.S.]
DEC. 1987 ....NES [EU]

greatest challenge. Besides the increasing convolutions of the tracks themselves, each set of courses also contains ever-denser hazards.

Course obstacles come in four varieties here. Pine trees appear along the courses and will cause you to flip over (and likely crash) if you hit them. The other static obstacle, snowmen, appear in arrangements similar to trees and can likewise cause you to spin out. Then there are reckless children on sleds (or sledges, this being a British game) who swerve back and forth along the tracks. Finally, you have to contend with other skiers, who can cause similar grief to the other obstacles. In other words, all the hazards do the same thing: Namely, slow you down. Clipping an obstacle will cause your skier to flip through the air and slow down slightly, whereas a full-body check will send your skier sprawling on their extremely well-defined butt and cause you, the player, to lose several precious seconds.

While *Slalom*'s racing action feels more forgiving than *Mach Rider*'s twisty-turny courses, it's still far from easy. The time limits on each course tend to be quite strict, especially on higher levels, and there are no redos. If you fail to make your target time, it's game over; no continues. You really have to avoid all the crap the game throws at you or else you're back to the qualifying race, no exceptions.

All in all, it's enough to make you wish your virtual skier had chosen instead to race on a mountain where the proprietors actually care about the safety and convenience of their users. Your in-game avatar has to deal with a lot of hassles, though to their credit, they gives you a reasonable number of control options. Besides the obvious left-right motion of a racing game, you can also press forward to accelerate and back to slow yourself. Unlike most racing games on NES, which use A and B to throttle speed, the up/down control scheme seen here makes a lot of sense. The D-pad basically controls the pitch and direction of your racer's body, resulting in a highly intuitive and natural style of play.

Rather than throttling speed, the face buttons cause your skier to jump. Leaping allows you to avoid certain hazards, most notably those dippy little sledders. The slopes are lined with tiny moguls, which unlike the other course clutter are not a hazard. Hit a mogul head-on and you'll gain a little air time, which doesn't hurt in the

least. Your racer is only human, however, so they can't vault a tall obstacle such as a tree or another racer; try jumping those and you'll only regret it as your tiny athlete goes tumbling through the air. Still, the added dimensionality gives *Slalom* a bit of personality that sets it apart from standard NES racers and puts it more into the realm of *Excitebike* [see *NES Works Vol. I*].

66 THE ADDITIONAL DIMENSIONALITY GIVES SLALOM PERSONALITY THAT SETS IT APART FROM THE COMPETITION

It's a pretty simple racer for the most part, with some basic obstacle-dodging built into the design, but its simple design makes things direct and accessible. It controls well and it looks great, with colorful visual elements that really pop against the white pathways that go speeding past.

And, it has the most lovingly rendered 8-bit buttocks we'll see on NES until *River City Ransom*. That bright orange ski suit looks so comfy, it must feel like wearing... nothing at all. *Stupid sexy Slalom.*

Km/H 108 3. PLAYER 1 BLUE MAX TIME 0:12:12

Km/H 104 2. PLAYER 1 IN THE TREES TIME 1:07:62

SLALOM ™

STEEP PEAK
WORLD RECORD TIMES

8. SUPER DOWNHILL   2·00·00   BBB
7. MONSTER RUN   2·10·00   AAA
6. ROCK N ROLL   2·20·00   LCS
5. HIGH OCTANE   1·50·00   BMS
4. THE WHOOSH   1·10·00   FB
3. BLUE MAX   1·25·00   ADW
2. TEASER   1·35·00   TSD
1. QUALIFYING RUN   1·05·00   TDJ

SLALOM ™

Km/H 106 1. QUALIFYING RUN PLAYER 1 TIME 0:13:12

FINISH   FINISH

Km/H 97 2. PLAYER 1 COTTON CANDY TIME 1:34:90

PLAYER 1

STEEP PEAK
BLUE MAX

SLALOM ™

A RARE FIND

Although the name Rare Ltd. means something very different in this post-Microsoft Kinect age than it once did, long-time game fanatics know the British studio as one of Nintendo's most essential and impressive partners. Of course, even longer-time game fanatics know it as something altogether different from that: The company the consistently pushed the state of game design and technology to new levels on the ZX Spectrum computer, back in the days when the company went by the moniker "Ultimate Play the Game." The company seized upon a combination of fluid animation, detailed isometic environments, and engrossing game design in the early 1980s, then used that work as a springboard onto the NES.

Although the NES architecture bore little resemblance to the Spectrum (whose Z80-based innards put it more in line with Sega's SG-1000 or the MSX home computer), Rare managed to bring their knack for technical excellence to bear on Nintendo's system by essentially cheating. Certainly they got a head start—by a couple of years!—on other western development houses. The early lead Rare secured over their peers came about as a result of a feat of reverse-engineering: The company dissected the Famicom hardware and determined what made it tick well before the system had made its appearance in America as the NES.

A worthy accomplishment, no question, but ultimately less impressive than recognizing the potential of the console in the first place. Granted, the NES didn't catch to quite the same degree in Rare's home territory as in America and Japan, the U.K.-based studio demonstrated canny insight in hitching their wagon to the Famicom during its formative early days. Although it's difficult to say for certain who the most prolific for NES developer was, since so much development work went uncredited, Rare almost certainly ranks among the top three: Perhaps not as prolific as the TOSE content factory, but ultimately responsible for dozen upon dozen of NES games—some forgettable, but many pushing the era's boundaries in terms of technology and design.

Rare exploded into the international scene on NES, but the company never forgot its Spectrum roots. In addition to direct sequels to their older computer games (such as *Solar Jetman*, an expanded follow-up to *Jetpac*), Rare also created a fair few games that channeled the spirit of the Spectrum work in new ways. For example, *Cobra Triangle* and *Snake Rattle & Roll* offered a nod to their Filmation legacy with isometric graphics and an absolutely unrelenting difficulty level. And, of course, *Wizards & Warriors* plays like a version of *Knight Lore* that's had its perspective pitched from isometric to side-on, with shifts in gameplay to match.

Although Rare would ultimately hit their perfect stride on Super NES and Nintendo 64, publishing only a handful of games that each hit with massive impact, there's something to be said for their NES output. It was scattered, sure, but it never lacked for invention.

Knight Lore [Famicom Disk System]

Solar Jetman courtesy of vgmuseum.com

Battletoads in Battlemaniacs [Super NES] courtesy of vgmuseum.com

TRACK & FIELD

Developer: **Konami** / *Publisher*: **Konami**
Release date: June 1985 *[JP]* **April 1987** *[U.S.]* **Feb. 1992** *[EU]*
NES-TR

From the collection of Josh Fairhurst

KONAMI'S MASH HIT

After closing out 1986 with the excellent *Gradius*, Konami returned to fill the NES's April 1987 release list with two more arcade conversions. While neither of these games seems to hold quite the same retrospective esteem for the company as *Gradius*, which they republish at every opportunity, *Track & Field*, at least, remains something of an 8-bit icon.

The first multi-event sports title for NES, *Track & Field* actually began life as an official, licensed Olympics tie-in. Released in arcades in 1983 under the name *Hyper Olympic*, it was produced as a companion title for the 1984 summer games. I can't help but wonder if the Olympic connection helped give *Track & Field* its longevity—specifically, its connection to the '84 games. Here in the U.S., the '84 Olympics had been a big deal, something of a defining moment for the American perspective on the games. That competition took place in Los Angeles, the first time in half a century that the Olympics had been hosted in the U.S., and they followed a string of increasingly dispirited competitions that had reached a low point for America when our team boycotted the '80s games altogether due to strife with that year's host, the Soviet Union. The U.S.S.R. and other Eastern Bloc nations returned the favor by boycotting the L.A. games, which meant that, absent most of their fiercest competitors, the U.S. teams absolutely ran the board.

The '84 Olympics also gave us enduring icons like Mary Lou Retton and the now-standard John Williams theme that remains an iconic element of Olympic broadcasts. They were, in short, a *big deal* for a country just beginning to feel good about itself again after the very difficult 1970s, and that warmth surely spilled over somewhat to make its official tie-in game a hit here.

It doesn't hurt that Konami created in *Track & Field* a masterwork of pick-up-and-play game design. In a lot of ways, it feels years ahead of itself; its use of a simple, adaptable control scheme across a multitude of minigame events more or less predicted the likes of *Mario Party* and a massive swath of Wii releases and their imitators. *Track & Field* allows players to compete in eight different events, each of which takes just a minute or two to complete. There's a pretty decent balance between raw twitch-muscle reflex and actual practiced skill, so the package manages to offer something to satisfy nearly every different kind of player.
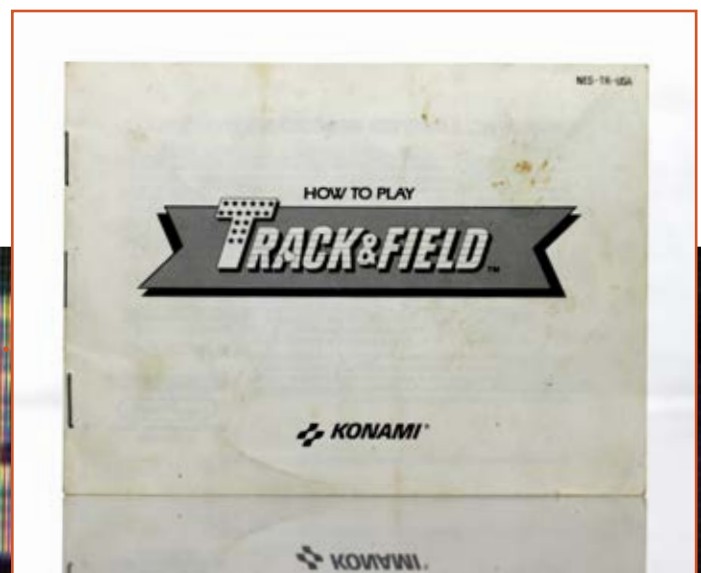
At its most hyperactive, button-mashy extreme, *Track & Field* gives you events like the 100-Meter Dash. This is literally nothing more than a test to see who can push buttons the fastest; once the race begins, the 100-Meter Dash simply boils down to tapping buttons as quickly as possible. Funnily enough, because this utterly mundane race event inspired no end of ingenuity among players to see who could come up with some sort of technique to hammer the button as rapidly as possible. We can't all be Toshiyuki "16-Shot" Takahashi, after all. As a personal anecdote, I had friends who devised their own secret grip techniques to allow them to hit the button with their index fingers, or who even constructed elaborate systems at pizza arcades that used a spoon and a straw as a makeshift lever mechanism to allow them to pound the buttons even more quickly. Of course, a few months after *Track & Field*, Nintendo released the NES Advantage joystick with its built-in auto-fire feature, and the arms race finally achieved a period-appropriate détente.

In Japan, *Hyper Olympic* for Famicom [see *NES Works Vol. 0*] shipped with a pair of linked, bespoke controllers that consisted of nothing but a box with two buttons to put two players on even footing. This controller undoubtedly failed to reach the U.S. for several reasons, but the most salient of them was the fact that the *Track & Field* that shipped in 1987 in America was in fact a combination of two different *Hyper Olympic* carts for Famicom. The initial release contained only the button-mashy events, while the follow-up offered the more nuanced competitions.

Still, even if they can't be completed by hammering buttons as quickly as possible, those more complex events operated under fairly simple rules here. Skeet Shooting works much like the Clay Target mode from *Duck Hunt* [see *NES Works Vol. I*], except that *Track & Field* doesn't support light guns. Skeets appear from one of two different places, and you have to fire at them with the corresponding button when the skeet lines up with one of the auto-targeting reticles. Your goal is to hit a set number of skeets within 15 seconds in order to qualify, and there's a little bit of nuance here in that the more skeets you hit in succession the easier it becomes to continue your streak.

The most complex event here is Archery. You have eight arrows

to fire into a bull's-eye in order to achieve a qualifying score, but you have to compensate for the wind, and this takes a bit of adjustment to get used to. As the targets glide past, you have to time your button press and release in order to hit the target on both X and Y axes. It has the most demanding qualifying score requirement of all the events here, so it tends to be where many playthroughs fizzle out.

Outside of this one notable exception, though, *Track & Field* consists of seconds-long sporting events that require players to tweak shared command concepts to accommodate the specifics of that contest. For example, the Long Jump controls a lot like the 100-Meter Dash, except that you cap it off by holding up to leap, attempting to find the optimal angle for maximum distance. Similarly, 110-Meter Hurdles works a lot like the 100-Meter Dash, with the additional element of needing to leap at regular intervals. The Javelin Throw is essentially the Long Jump with a different thing sailing into the air at the end of the run. And so forth.

Being an arcade conversion, *Track & Field* showed up on several systems before it made its way to NES, but the NES game is the one most people remember. It looks the most like the arcade game, and it had the benefit of showing up right around the time the NES started to gain traction in the U.S. Konami would revisit the game with the NES-exclusive *Track & Field II* a few years later—a tie-in with the '88 Olympics in Seoul, as it happened. And, bizarrely, *Track & Field* for NES—this one, not the sequel—shipped in Europe all the way in 1992 as a tie-in to the Barcelona Olympics.

For Americans, at least, *Track & Field* for NES is a bit of a nostalgic bomb... not to mention a major sales-driver for the ever-popular NES Advantage. The original arcade version also served as the inspiration behind Epyx's highly successful "*Games*" franchise for home computers, most of which would show up on NES in a far less satisfying fashion than *Track & Field*—the first by year's end, in fact.

KONAMI

1 100-METER DASH
2 LONG JUMP
3 110-METER HURDLES
4 JAVELIN THROW
5 SKEET SHOOTING
6 TRIPLE JUMP
7 ARCHERY
8 HIGH JUMP

SCORE
HI 050000
1P 000000
2P
WORLD RECORD
09sec93
QUALIFY 14sec00◄

1P ➤ ●●●
CPU ➤ ●●●
10:42

CPU 1086cm/sec   1UP 0913cm/sec

ASH   KONAMI

80
80

SCORE
HI 050000
1P 000000
2P
WORLD RECORD
08m 90
QUALIFY 05m 50
1st TRY FOUL
2nd TRY FOUL
3rd TRY
1P 00m 00 ✕
CPU

SPEED ■■■■■■■■■■■■■■■ 1057cm/sec

LONG JUMP

3 4 5 6 7 8

80°

SCORE
HI 50000
1P 33680
2P
WORLD RECORD
4300
QUALIFY 2400
1st TRY
2nd TRY
3rd TRY
1P ➤

12:50

SCORE
HI 50000
1P 5190
2P
WORLD RECORD
3500
QUALIFY 2500
1st TRY 2390
2nd TRY 2800
3rd TRY 2490 ◄
1P ➤ 2800 ◉

ANGLE 5.84°

WIND ↑0   SCORE

SCORE
HI 50000
1P 0
2P
WORLD RECORD
2m36
QUALIFY 2m26
1st TRY
2nd TRY
3rd TRY
1P

SPEED ■■■■■■■■■■■■■ 1015 cm/sec

HIGH JUMP   KONAMI

66°

RUSH 'N ATTACK

ATTACK THE BLOC

Also in April 1987, Konami brought its minor arcade hit *Green Beret* to NES. While not necessarily a great game, it's certainly an interesting one, for a few different reasons. For starters, *Green Beret* didn't make it to the U.S. under its original name. Instead, it acquired a new title: *Rush 'N Attack*.

The same east-west Cold War tension that made the '80 and '84 Olympics so dramatic manifested here in a bit of branding that's honestly hard to believe actually made it to market. Yes, the U.S. and the Soviet Union were very much at odds with each other in 1987—though that had softened considerably thanks to the advent of *glasnost* beginning in 1985—but pitching this game as a lone man staving off a Soviet invasion still seems a little tasteless. Can you imagine a 2021 game called *Isis Crisis* or *Daesh Dash*? No, you can't, because that's crass beyond belief; yet here's Konami's U.S. marketing team, straight-up vilifying another nation.

That said, despite its illiberal politics, *Rush 'N Attack* gives us our first clear sign of the liberal approach that would define Konami's Japanese-to-English localizations on NES. There was a little bit of snark to the found in the *Gradius* manual if you looked for it, but from here on out, it's all sarcasm, all the time. And this one questionable rebranding aside, that's a good thing. Look at the other localization efforts to have appeared to this point on NES; even Nintendo itself didn't bother to revamp its games for coherent grammar. The only real effort we've seen in localizing games for English has come from Bandai, and those efforts haven't focused on making things coherent for Americans. Rather, they amounted to reworking sprites the bare minimum required to avoid copyright infringement with the Japanese licensed properties the games had been based on. Konami would be the first publisher to put some actual care into their U.S. releases. Not only do you get that iconic silver-banded box art from here on out, you get memorably goofy names like "*Castlevania*," too.

So, this is a good sign for the future. Likewise, *Rush 'N Attack*'s overall vibe—especially its visual aesthetic—sets the tone for Konami's NES library as well. *Gradius* looked good in a "generic space ships with Moai heads" kind of way, and *Track 'N Field* was all about cartoon athletes sporting '70s porn 'staches. With *Rush 'N Attack*, we

see our first proper glimpse of what would become the Konami NES house graphical style. The hero of the game—the eponymous green beret who is rushin' to attack Russians—is a sort of lanky, realistically proportioned man with a blank void for a face. He stands out from the characters we've previously seen on NES, all of whom have had a cartoonish look to them, almost always with clearly defined facial features. *Rush 'N Attack* aspires to a more realistic look and feel than other publishers' NES fare, and it points to a game aesthetic we'll see a lot more of in the future.

With that said, the game itself isn't wildly different from what's come before. It owes a tremendous debt to Capcom's *Ghosts 'N Goblins* [see *NES Works Vol. II*], all the way down to the casual form of the word "and" in its title. Your fragile little man runs left to right, facing endless waves of bad guys who can kill him at a single touch. The moment-to-moment action plays out as less of a platformer than *Ghosts 'N Goblins*, though, having more in common with the system's belt scrollers—*Kung-Fu* [see *NES Works Vol. I*] and *Trojan*—with the biggest difference being the addition of multi-tier level designs that allow you to advance on either a high or a low path.

Rush 'N Attack keeps its action extremely simple and extremely difficult. Your soldier can run forward, jump, lay flat on the ground, and attack with a knife. Certain soldiers will drop weapons that you can snatch and use for a few rounds, which can be helpful when fighting end-of-level gauntlets. Brushing against any sort of hazard is an instant kill, so you probably won't be surprised to learn *Rush 'N Attack* includes a lot of the same sound effects that will be heard in next year's co-op hit *Contra* [see *NES Works Vol. IV*].

Enemies run mindlessly at you in endless numbers, so much of your play time amounts to pausing to stab foes with your trench knife. If you're good, you can stab them with a running jump that allows you to attack without depleting your forward momentum—a trick we'll see deployed in *Castlevania* as well.

The bad guys don't simply run, either; some can perform flying kicks that have to be met in kind. The yellow-clad soldiers are the worst; not only do they relentlessly fire at you with pistols, they're the only soldier variant that doesn't mindlessly run off the screen. Instead,

soldiers in yellow uniforms will stick around firing bursts of bullets at you, chasing you up and down ladders, and generally ruining your day. They're especially dangerous in combination with other soldier types, since it's tough to duck under their bullets while trying to jump and stab one of the guys delivering a flying kick. Thankfully, many of the same tactics that worked against *Kung-Fu*'s knife-throwers apply here, despite the games' aesthetic and mechanical differences.

At the end of each stage, you have to fight a set of unique enemies, which tend to be unreasonably difficult. These range from a couple dozen guard dogs that assault in you relentless waves to guys on flying platforms who pepper you with bombs.

For many players, myself included, the fifth-stage boss is a hard stopping point to progress through *Rush 'N Attack*. This encounter features a trio of yellow soldiers who parachute in firing machine guns at you at unpredictable angles. You need to somehow survive their overwhelming attack in order to face the even more taxing final boss encounter. At the end of the sixth stage, you have to fight off a stream of enemies while snatching the bazookas they drop to fire at a missile, destroying it before it's launched into the U.S. heartland or whatever mad scheme we thought the Soviets were hatching to destroy us back in the '80s.

It's an engaging and memorable game, though Konami made some design decisions here that cause the game to be harder than was strictly necessary. For one thing, as in *Trojan* and *Track & Field*, jumping is set to Up on the D-pad. Thankfully, that input standard would soon be phased out almost entirely in NES games, but it's especially frustrating here since it means you have a tendency to leap into the air when reversing directions to face enemies converging from both sides. Another annoying jump mechanic: If you jump near a ladder, you'll automatically grab on to it. This is fine when you want

to climb, but it leaves you vulnerable to attack when you're avoiding or attacking enemies in the heat of combat.

The checkpoint system can also be quite cruel; rather than using fixed checkpoints, *Rush 'N Attack* simply sets you back a set distance from the point where you die. It's actually possible to lose progress and end up back at the beginning of the stage if you die a few times in rapid succession, adding insult to injury.

To mitigate some of its crueler mechanical choices, *Rush 'N Attack* is at least an extremely responsive game. Your little guy can stab quickly, and you can reverse directions even in mid-air. It also has extremely generous hit detection, allowing you to sort of wave your knife in the general direction of a bad guy to kill them and always giving your attacks priority over those of your enemies. The four weapons dropped by the dull-yellow supine soldiers are handy, too. The bazooka and grenades can take out multiple foes as well as mine emplacements, while the handgun allows you completely unlimited fire for a set amount of time.

As a take on *Ghosts 'N Goblins* cast in the mold of '80s political hysteria, *Rush 'N Attack* does the trick, despite its bumpier moments. But, again, it's mostly notable for the way it hints at much better things to come from Konami.

BURGER TIME

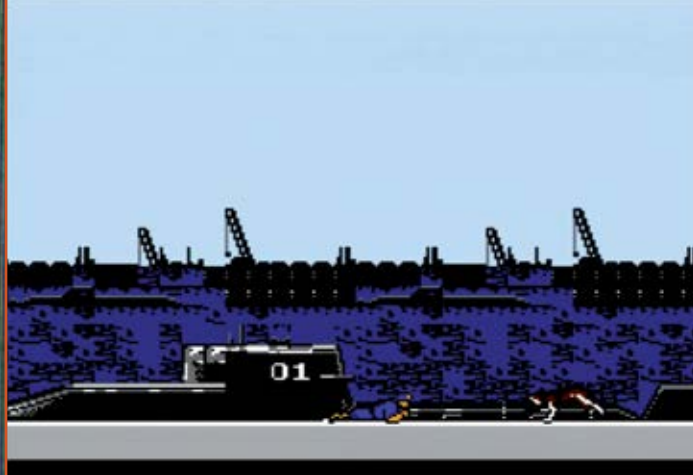*Developer:* SAS Sakata | *Publisher:* Data East
Release date: Nov. 1985 *[JP]* May 1987 *[U.S.]*
NES-BR

A PICKLED PORT

Data East makes its 1987 debut to assure us that the old ways aren't entirely dead. *BurgerTime* converts the 1982 arcade classic to NES, and there's no denying that it feels pretty dated compared to the games flanking it here in 1987. Even so, there's something to be said for highly faithful arcade ports, especially on hardware capable of reproducing them with much greater fidelity than was possible on older platforms like Atari 2600 or Intellivision. Plus, it's a reminder that the NES isn't completely a clean break from everything that came before the Atari crash.

I won't pretend to know *BurgerTime* and its legacy well enough to state that this, definitively, is *the* best *BurgerTime* port ever. But I will say it certainly looks and plays respectably close to the arcade version. *BurgerTime*, of course, was a minor arcade hit cut from the fabric of games like *Donkey Kong* and *Popeye*. You run around on a series of ladders, evading hazards, while trying to complete a goal. The manic pace and sheer number of enemies chasing you gives *BurgerTime* a feel reminiscent of *Lode Runner*—though, of course, that game originally debuted a year after *BurgerTime* first served up its meaty madness in arcades. With the ladders and platforms and mechanics based around plunging monsters to lower levels to destroy or distract them, *BurgerTime* owes an even more direct debt to UPL's proto-platformer *Space Panic*, which helped inspire the design of *Lode Runner* and was in turn almost certainly inspired by *Heiankyo Alien*. Yes, it all comes full circle here.

A big part of what makes *BurgerTime* so memorable is its oddball theme, which is the original kitchen nightmare—sorry, Gordon Ramsay. You play as a burger chef named Peter Pepper, who dashes about a series of ladders and walkways trying to complete the construction of the world's largest hamburgers (each is roughly 20 feet in diameter). Somehow, each individual burger component has been isolated to its own separate platform, and the only way to build a burger is to walk across each ingredient, which causes it to drop to the next level down. It's a strange concept for a game, not to mention a frightful health code violation. But that's vintage arcade gaming.

To complete the fever-dream feel of it all, Peter Pepper spends his time being chased around the burger factory by various food ingredients, including hot dogs, fried eggs, pickles. Their touch is deadly, perhaps due to the transmission of fatal doses of cholesterol, but in any case you have to avoid them while finishing off the burgers. There doesn't seem to be any particular rhyme or reason for the ferocious onslaught of these ingredients; one could understand a hot dog attempting to undermine the construction of burgers, given their
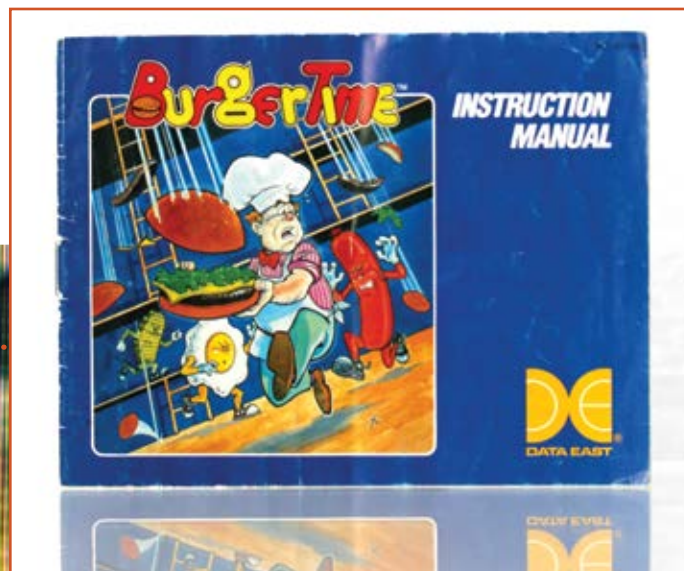
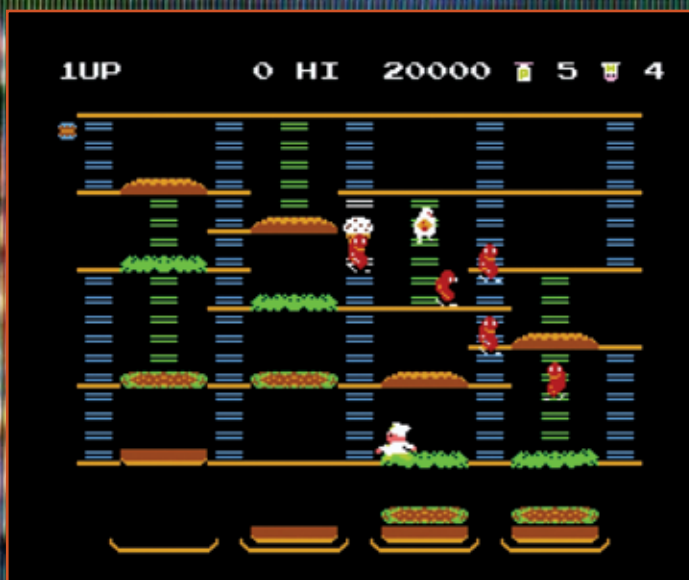long-standing rivalry as cookout standards, but pickles and fried eggs are beloved, classic burger add-ons. Perhaps they seek revenge against Peter for being left out of his boring, bog-standard burger creations.

Peter Pepper does not face these savory sadists totally unprepared. He carries with him a limited cache of pepper (the seasoning, not his family name; though given the presence of sentient food throughout *BurgerTime*, it's entirely possible that he totes around the equivalent of Grandma's ashes). By throwing dashes of pepper, he can briefly stun the militant snacks, giving himself a moment of breathing room. Peter can also destroy his foes by dropping a burger component on them, which is perhaps the most realistic concept to be found here; being crushed beneath a 20-foot disc of sizzling beef can't be good for anyone's health.

Once you manage to complete one set of burgers, you'll move on to a new scaffold arrangement that's even more difficult (and patrolled by even faster food items) than the last. It's simple, it's strange, it's hard. Yep, it's a vintage arcade game, and it's reproduced faithfully on NES. If there's one complaint to be lobbed at BurgerTime on NES, it's perhaps that the controls are *too* authentic. To climb or disengage from a ladder, you really have to line up with it pixel-perfectly, which is the source of most player deaths in this conversion. Otherwise, there's not much more to say about this one; it's old, it's faithful, it's fine. Now, Game Boy's top-to-bottom *BurgerTime Deluxe* revamp, on the other hand—that's one to look forward to.

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1UP 7400 HI 20000   3   2

PRE-CRASH GAMES ON NES

The NES marked a major break from the orthodoxy of game consoles that came before it, especially in the U.S. In every respect—hardware specs, game design, and business practices—the NES upped the standards for the medium, simultaneously evolving the format and ensuring its long-term viability. However, it wasn't a perfect break from the games of the past; ultimately, the NES featured nearly two dozen games that first appeared before the "Atari crash" of 1983 plunged a stake into the beating heart of the golden age of American consoles. While 23 games represents only about three percent of the total NES library, vintage games like BurgerTime are still worth celebrating—especially in light of the fact that their NES iterations were often the best versions of those games released on any 8-bit system.

Archon [originally on Atari 8-bit | 1983]
Like chess, but more tactical. (*NES: 1990*)

Bump'n Jump [originally for arcades | 1982]
A top-down racer, but also a platformer. (*NES: 1988*)

BurgerTime [originally for arcades | 1982]
The original kitchen nightmares. (*NES: 1987*)

Defender II [originally for arcades | 1981]
Better known as *Stargate*, ported to NES by HAL. (*NES: 1988*)

Donkey Kong [originally for arcades | 1981]
The foundation of Nintendo's games empire. (*NES: 1986*)

Donkey Kong Jr. [originally for arcades | 1982]
The uneven follow-up to a megahit. (*NES: 1986*)

Donkey Kong 3 [originally for arcades | 1983]
A curious shoot-em-up turn for Kong. (*NES: 1986*)

Dragon's Lair [originally for arcades | 1983]
A cinematic hit radically reinvented for 8-bit. (*NES: 1990*)

Elevator Action [originally for arcades | 1983]
A Cold War action game set in dangerous high-rises. (*NES: 1987*)

Galaga [originally for arcades | 1981]
A perfect arcade creation, done justice on NES. (*NES: 1988*)

Gyruss [originally for arcades | 1983]
Konami's take on *Tempest*, best remembered for its tunes. (*NES: 1989*)

Joust [originally for arcades | 1982]
Fly on an ostrich, waging war on buzzard knights. (*NES: 1988*)

Mario Bros. [originally for arcades | 1983]
Turtle-kicking cooperative action. (*NES: 1986*)

Millipede [originally for arcades | 1982]
The bug-blasting sequel to *Centipede*. (*NES: 1988*)

Ms. Pac-Man [originally for arcades | 1982]
Shipped for NES twice, once without Nintendo's authorization by Tengen, then years later by Namco. (NES: *1990/1993*)

Nobunaga's Ambition [originally on PC-88 | 1983]
Technically, the NES game was more of a sequel or expansion to the original PC strategy title, but who's counting? (*NES: 1989*)

Qix [originally for arcades | 1981]
The original territory-control game. (*NES: 1991*)

Pac-Man [originally for arcades | 1980]
An arcade megahit released for NES... twice! (*NES: 1987/1993*)

Popeye [originally for arcades | 1982]
A visually impressive take on the classic cartoon. (*NES: 1986*)
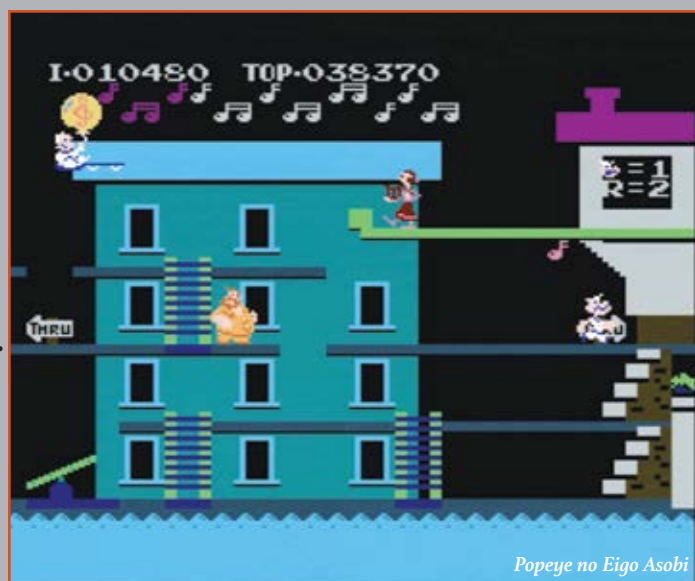
Spy Hunter [originally for arcades | 1983]
Top-down racing... with machine guns. (*NES: 1987*)

Tag Team Wrestling [originally for arcades | 1983]
Innovative but clumsy menu-based brawling. (*NES: 1986*)
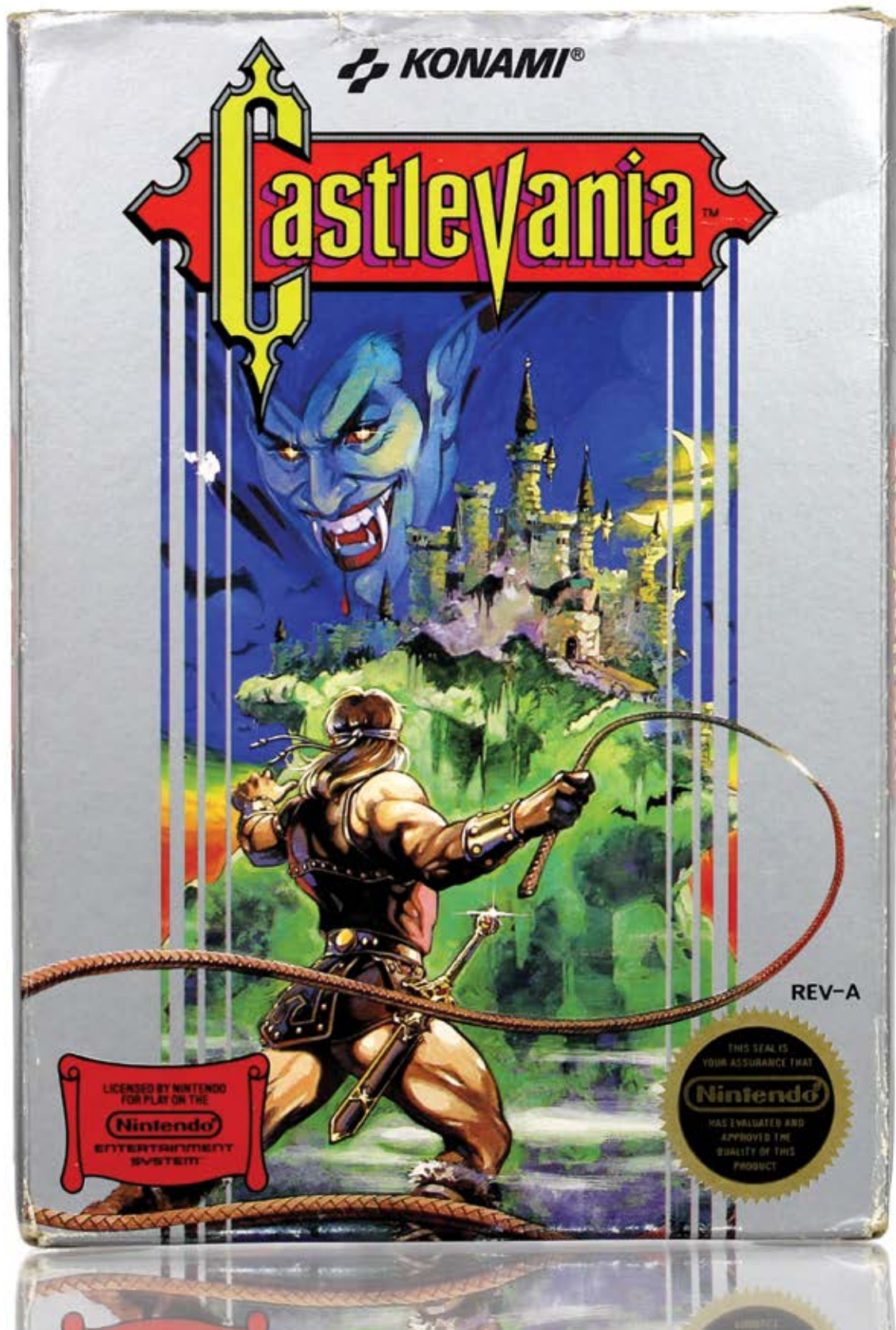
Xevious [originally for arcades | 1982]
A highly top-down influential shooter in Japan. (*NES: 1988*)

Popeye no Eigo Asobi

Joust

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PRODUCT

CASTLEVANIA

Developer: **Konami** / *Publisher:* **Konami**
Release date: **Oct. 1986** *[JP]* **May 1987** *[U.S.]* **Dec. 1989** *[EU]*
NES-CV

From the collection of Josh Fairhurst

WHIP IT GOOD

Castlevania is a landmark release for the platform, and for Konami. The first year and a half that followed the arrival of *Super Mario Bros.* to cap the console's launch [see *NES Works Vol. I*], third-party developers for NES stumbled toward excellence with tiny, halting steps, delivering games that hinted at greatness without ever quite delivering. *Castlevania* delivers, and it does so by synthesizing elements of several action games we've already seen here on NES.

Still, while this compact and challenging adventure echoes previous releases, it emerges as something wholly unique in its own right, deservedly launching a franchise that would endure for decades. The *Castlevania* saga begins here, and it's an unlikely candidate to become a world-class, legendary video game franchise.

The entire thing has a bizarre cognitive dissonance about it. On one hand, it's an intense and challenging action game steeped in Gothic imagery. On the other, it's one long, extended riff on the classic monster movie properties Universal accumulated over the decades. The game doesn't even contain real credits to acknowledge its creators; instead, the staff roll is a series of tortured puns on the names of legendary actors: Christopher Bee instead of Christopher Lee, Boris Karloffice instead of Boris Karloff, and so forth. Key contributors, including designer Hitoshi Akamatsu and composer Kinuyo Yamashita, go uncredited here, the veil of their anonymity lifted only decades later.

The game's contents reflect the monster-movie gimmick from start to finish. The only properly original character here is the protagonist, Simon Belmont (or "Belmondo," as the credits say), while every monster he fights is straight from a campy black and white horror movie. You begin by facing lowly zombies and vampire bats, ultimately working your way up the castle to take on Count Dracula himself. There's no beating about the bush; you're straight-up fighting Bram Stoker's iconic literary character by way of Bela Lugosi. Indeed, the game credits its screenplay to "Vram Stoker."

It's a marvelously charming choice, a different kind of whimsy than we've seen to date on NES. So far the platform has hosted extremely silly-looking games that marry cartoon graphics to bone-crushing gameplay, or else games that adopt a serious tone from top to bottom. *Castlevania* takes a different tack. Its detailed graphics look utterly straight-laced, building on the Konami house style first seen in *Rush'N Attack*. Simon Belmont is drawn with normal human proportions, and his reasonably-sized head lacks facial features. Likewise, the monsters he fights tend to be equally "realistic" and marvelously detailed. Consider the Grim Reaper's worm-eaten cloak, or the intimidating bulk of Axe Knights. Look at the richly drawn backgrounds, which differ from every stage. The game takes you past decaying tapestries, across crumbling parapets, up corpse-strewn torture chambers, and through dizzying clockwork mechanisms, each illustrated with distinct style and loads of detail.

Despite the care the developers invested into creating as realistic a setting as they could, though, the upshot is that the whole thing is one long gag or homage. It's a serious game, but it doesn't take itself *too* seriously.

Context does much to help explain the peculiarities of *Castlevania*. For starters, you can't talk about this game without mentioning *Ghosts 'N Goblins* [see *NES Works Vol. II*]. While *Rush'N Attack* shared a few things in common with *Ghosts 'N Goblins*, it ultimately had more in common with *Trojan*. *Castlevania*, on the other hand, was clearly intended to be Konami's answer to Capcom's big hit, and it's a massive improvement on that influential but decidedly rough work all around.

The pieces are all here. It's a wickedly challenging action game steeped in the trappings of the horror genre. Like *Ghosts 'N Goblins*, *Castlevania* depicts a hero's journey through a continuous, shifting landscape depicted on a scrolling stage map. Simon, like Arthur, is bound by highly restrictive jump physics, which he balances by wielding multiple weapons. However, *Castlevania* surpasses *Ghosts 'N Goblins* on all levels. It's a prettier, fairer, smarter, better designed adventure in every respect.

Consider Simon's weapon skills. Unlike Arthur, Simon can carry two weapons at once rather than being forced to abandon his current weapon in order to acquire a new one. Where Arthur had no primary weapon, simply swapping his current selection out any time he picked

up an alternate, Simon always wields a mystical whip. His swappable weapons are secondary tools, which the player activates by holding up as Simon attacks. These extra weapons supplement the whip, and they bring nuance and strategy to the action.

For one thing, secondary weapons are strictly limited in use. Simon has to collect heart icons in order to power them; run out of hearts and you're unable to fire off a sub weapon. These secondary abilities are constrained by limited ammunition as a matter of game balance, since they tend to complement the whip and give players a wider range of options for taking on foes. Where the whip attacks straight ahead several paces in the direction Simon currently faces, the axe arcs upward as it flies forward a greater distance. Holy water strikes the ground and creates a temporary patch of flame at Simon's feet that works as a sort of barrier. The boomerang doubles back on its flight path, pierces most enemies, and can take out multiple monsters as it flies. And so forth. Weapons have special effects, too. The axe, for example, can reach over the durable shield of axe armor knights, taking them out in two hits instead of eight by striking their vulnerable bodies; holy water can stun-lock enemies and register multiple hits, even against bosses.

Most weapons can be upgraded with a double or triple attack that allows you to fire off multiple weapons at a time rather than being forced to wait for your initial attack to leave the screen. Some weapon multipliers are located in fixed spots, but they'll also appear if you destroy enough enemies with that sub weapon, which encouraged you not to horde hearts or collect a replacement. Effective sub weapon tactics are a critical part of taking on most bosses. It's possible to defeat Death or Frankenstein's Monster with just your whip, but having access to the correct tool makes those tasks considerably less unreasonable.

Death and its Simon-seeking trio of scythes can be notoriously difficult to defeat with sheer skill, but if you build up a triple modifier by tossing boomerangs at the medusa heads and axe armors leading up to Death's chamber, you'll be able to fill Death's chamber with three pinwheeling weapons at a time to overwhelm your foe and keep the screen clear of its projectiles. Even Dracula's demonic final form is vulnerable to being frozen with holy water, which can spell the difference between victory and defeat.

Simon's whip is a clever, unique weapon in its own right. It treads the line between melee and ranged attacks, giving Simon decent reach with his strikes—but not too far. The physicality of the whip also helps define it. Lashing enemies demands a commitment from Simon, and it roots him to the spot for a moment as his whip reaches full extension. However, he's hardly helpless; Simon can attack while leaping to maintain mobility. On top of that, his wind-up animation means that anything that hits the whip as Simon's rears back to strike will be damaged, too.

Not unlike his sub weapons, the whip can be powered up twice. By default, the whip has a short range and weak striking power. However, once you've collected a few heart icons, the next heart icon to appear will be a power-up that turns the whip into a flail and increases its power 50%. Collecting a few more hearts will produce a second flail icon that extends the whip's length, too. The threshold for upgrading the whip is so slim and takes so little effort in most stages that you begin to suspect Konami included the upgrade process to give players a sensation of leveling up their strength.

One other detail of note helps differentiate *Castlevania* from *Ghosts 'N Goblins*, for the better. While enemies do occasionally drop power-ups, most of what Simon collects drops from fixed points— usually destructible candelabras—in predefined arrangements. This makes for a more predictable, consistent game, and it also gave the developers the opportunity to place power-ups strategically; for example, players will often be given access to an axe before taking on flying enemies whose speed and patterns can be difficult to counter

with just a whip.

Despite these rich melee mechanics and design refinements, *Castlevania* is not an easy game. However, it's one that can be mastered with skill and practice, because its action has a marvelous sense of consistency. Not only will enemies and weapons spawn consistently and predictably, but they're arranged fairly. Simon jumps a lot like Arthur in that once you take a leap you're committed to it. Unlike with *Ghosts 'N Goblins*, you always feel that the world of *Castlevania* was clearly designed around Simon's physical skills. Enemies will never overwhelm you once you understand their triggers and patterns. Even vexing or infinitely spawning foes like sine-wave Medusa heads and the quick, bounding flea men obey logical rules that allow them to be countered with careful play.

In a word, *Castlevania* is fair. It may not seem like it at first, when Medusa heads come swooping in to knock you from a moving platform and into a fatal bottomless pit, but it absolutely is. *Castlevania* does a great job of leading you through its gauntlet of challenges, and each screen is a carefully crafted box of hazards and platforms that builds on what has come before. You begin the game outside of Dracula's castle, where there are no threats to master, only gear to collect. Once you enter the castle, you face mindless zombies that move in a line, punctuated by a handful of panthers that only attack once you come within range and bats that drift lazily at the same height at which the zombies appear. The bats prepare you for the Medusa heads, which you initially face on a flat stretch of ground where the knockback from their collision can't send you flying into a pit, a mercy that disappears once they make their second appearance.

The game escalates like this, with a few notable difficulty spikes—bosses in particular. Things get nasty the instant you reach the second half of the quest: You plunge into the subterranean lake where the fish men you fought in the early going on safe ground now spring from the water as you ride a tiny platform across a vast, fatal expanse of lake.

It's worth noting that *Castlevania*—despite being a brief game— was not intended to be completed in a single sitting. In Japan, it had shipped as *Akumajou Dracula*, Konami's debut title for the Famicom Disk System expansion. Unlike many games that would make the transition from disk to cartridge for the U.S. market, *Castlevania* didn't suffer many compromises in the course of its conversion. The only real excision, in fact, was the ability to save your progress along with a necessary *The Legend of Zelda*-style file management screen (which was accompanied by a musical theme that similarly didn't make the cut for the overseas release). This means that, in Japan, players could struggle mightily to overcome a difficult stage or boss and record their progress to take a swipe at the next stage some other time. Here on NES, though, players had to complete the game in a single sitting.

Thankfully, *Castlevania* does at least offer the kindness of infinite continues—something that wasn't a given at the time: See *Trojan* or *Rush'N Attack*. It also generously allows you to continue

your progress from the very final stage if you make it all the way to Dracula, meaning you don't have to navigate the clock tower every time you lose to the final boss. And lose you will, since Dracula has two attack phases and doesn't shy away from overwhelming you with brute strength and bulk. His initial form, the classic Bela Lugosi count complete with robe and widow's peak, can materialize right on top of Simon before firing off a triple-spread of fireballs that centers on Simon's location at the time of the attack. His second demonic form is slower to attack, but demon-Dracula's enormous mass makes his mere presence dangerous, as he can easily leap into you and corner you. The ferocity of the game makes completing it all the more satisfying. And thanks to its thoughtful design and balancing, you can complete it without anywhere near the hair-pulling of most other NES action games we've seen.

You can make a convincing argument that *Castlevania* is the first NES platformer we've seen since *Super Mario Bros.* where you're likely to take a loss in stride rather than cursing the programmers. Even initially daunting encounters like Frankenstein's Monster—where the real challenge is a special indestructible flea man, Igor, who leaps around the room and launches fireballs at you—become manageable once you learn their inner workings. *Castlevania* is a far cry from its companion release, an MSX game that debuted in Japan around the same time as the Famicom disk. Both games were called *Akumajou Dracula*—"Demon Castle Dracula"—but despite some visual and mechanical similarities, they are by no means the same game. *Akumajou Dracula* for MSX plays, well, like an 8-bit microcomputer game. Rather than taking the form of a linear action game, it adds an element of exploration and even an economy. Simon travels through a succession of levels on MSX, but those individual stages take the form of infinite loops in which players need to seek specific keys in order to advance and purchase their alternate weapons. It's a clumsier, less focused game that helped inspire the second NES *Castlevania*, but as a work unto itself it feels decidedly lacking—not to mention less forgiving, thanks to its lack of easily accessible continues (which could only be unlocked through a special Konami-made cheat device called the *Game Master*—no relation to the *Captain N: The Game Master* cartoon which featured Simon Belmont as a primary cast member).

By contrast, *Castlevania* on NES sends players on a completely linear journey through Dracula's castle. There's less substance to the NES game, but its overall design is far more focused and refined. Between stages, players get to watch Simon chart out his progress against a scrolling map that neatly matches the actual design of each level and provides an overall sense of context for the journey. This idea had previous appeared on NES in *Ghosts 'N Goblins* and *Trojan*, and it also showed up in the arcade version of *Rush'N Attack*, but it works better here than in any previous outing.

A big part of what makes *Castlevania*'s sense of place feel so concrete is how much variety the game packs into its background visuals. There are six levels here, but each one is broken down into three separate sub-stages. While all of a level's sub-stages share a unified color scheme and some common graphical elements, each one speaks to a different theme. The first level takes you through an

entryway by way of the basement of the castle; the third sends you through statuary and along exterior bridges; the fourth drops you into a watery cavern beneath the castle's foundations before you emerge into a courtyard and slip back into the castle by way of a rear entrance. The centerpiece of the game is the clock tower where Dracula lurks. You see it as the pinnacle of the stage map, spot it from a distance at the game's midpoint, and witness it up close and personal by way of the largest unique tile set in the game once you reach the final stage—a great use of visual cues to develop a dramatic buildup that pays off by reinforcing the fact that, yes, this is *it*.

In other words, *Castlevania* does a lot with six levels and a fairly limited amount of data space. Each level is occupied by a distinct mix of monsters and punctuated by a unique boss encounter, and every stage features its own memorable musical theme; *Castlevania* has, by far, the absolute best soundtrack to have appeared on NES to this date, with most of its tracks having been immortalized through remixes and rearrangements in numerous sequels.

In short, this is a tremendous game. Interestingly, it wasn't quite a massive hit right out of the gate, but positive word of mouth and some intriguing sequels (both of which received considerable promotion) kept the game in circulation through reprints for years. Deservedly so. Konami assembled a huge creative and technical milestone for the NES, an incisive argument that the console was absolutely capable of doing great things beyond *Super Mario Bros.* And it's a huge win for Konami, too, cementing the studio's place as one of the true elite of the NES world.

Castlevania would go on to inspire dozens of sequels and spin-offs, and this particular adventure would be officially remade no less than three times . In short: A masterpiece. A nearly perfect little piece of video gaming, and one that deserves all the plaudits given it... even if the changes Konami made to the American version do cause it to fall on the "unreasonably difficult" side of the scale.

SCORE-043490 TIME 0461 STAGE 07
PLAYER
ENEMY
♥-22
P-03
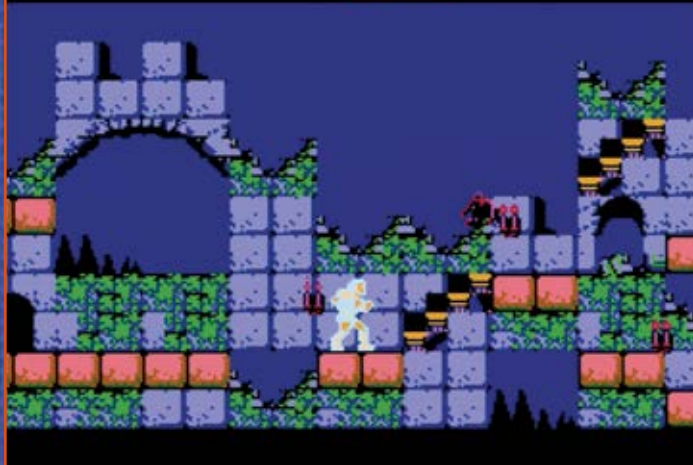
SCORE-040190 TIME 0000 STAGE 07
PLAYER
ENEMY
♥-05
P-03

SCORE-052590 TIME 0351 STAGE 09
PLAYER
ENEMY
♥-44
P-03

SCORE-027360 TIME 0364 STAGE 04
PLAYER
ENEMY
♥-09
P-03

SCORE-055090 TIME 0330 STAGE 09
PLAYER
ENEMY
♥-39
P-03

SCORE-035660 TIME 0099 STAGE 06
PLAYER
ENEMY
♥-09
P-03

SCORE-067640 TIME 0390 STAGE 10
PLAYER
ENEMY
-06 P-03

SCORE-043680 TIME 0352 STAGE 14
PLAYER
ENEMY
-32 P-03

SCORE-076440 TIME 0323 STAGE 11
PLAYER
ENEMY
-28 P-03

SCORE-060980 TIME 0239 STAGE 15
PLAYER
ENEMY
-46 P-03

SCORE-084040 TIME 0260 STAGE 12
PLAYER
ENEMY
-53 P-04

SCORE-063380 TIME 0219 STAGE 15
PLAYER
ENEMY
-43 P-03

SCORE-091160 TIME 0684 STAGE 16
PLAYER
ENEMY
P-02

SCORE-000300 TIME 0452 STAGE 18
PLAYER
ENEMY
P-03

SCORE-092960 TIME 0644 STAGE 17
PLAYER
ENEMY
P-02

SCORE-000400 TIME 0376 STAGE 18
PLAYER
ENEMY
P-03

SCORE-099760 TIME 0523 STAGE 18
PLAYER
ENEMY
P-01

AND THE HERO
SIMON BELMONDO

RETRONT