GAME BOY. WORLD

1990

VOL. 1

A complete index to every game released for Nintendo's Game Boy handheld console in Japan and America between January and June 1990

Text and photography by Jeremy Parish

Nintendo's Game Boy launched in both Japan and America in 1989, and its initial lineup — detailed so lovingly in *Game Boy World 1989*, which is also available in print! — saw developers getting a handle on both the potential of the system (the world's first truly capable handheld console) and its limitations (much greater than any 8-bit console of the era). Here in 1990, the system's library begins to mature… for better and for worse. On one hand, we see a wider selection of genres and more ambitious and inventive releases than in 1990; on the other, wow are there a lot of puzzle games.

The Game Boy World project aims to chronicle them all, fairly if not uncritically. Not everything that showed up on Game Boy deserved praise. At the same time, it's easy to fall into the trap of judging Game Boy creations by the standards of current portable games, of holding them to higher expectations than the hardware could fully fulfill. With this volume and accompanying video series (available for viewing at *http://www.youtube.com/toastyfrog*), I try to walk the difficult tightrope in the middle: Judging these games as creations of the times and technology that birthed them.

With each Game Boy World entry, I consider the game within the context of its origins, evaluate how well it holds up two decades later, dig into what information I can find about its creators, and attempt to document it in writing, photography, and screen grabs. As ever, my access to packaging is made possible by generous donors on Patreon as well as friends and collectors who are willing to give me access to these gems. All screen shots in this volume (unless otherwise noted) are captured via a Super Game Boy 2 on an RGB-modded Super NES, which in turn is upscaled to high-definition resolution through an xRGB Framemeister unit. These, too, have largely

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(cont.) been donated to the cause by generous game history enthusiasts who believe in this project, despite the fact that it's so niche and so specific that I'm the first to have made the effort. Game Boy will never have the cachet and popularity of Nintendo's classic consoles or the Genesis, TurboGrafx-16, et al., but there's plenty here that merits exploration. Sure, half these games turn out to be shoddy disappointments, but when isn't that the case for any system? For every truly crushing letdown — your *Ninja Boy*s and *Amazing Spider-Man*s — I've also enjoyed the opportunity to spend time with and really get to know some genuine greats. I knew *Gargoyle's Quest* was good stuff coming into this venture, but I had no idea *Mercenary Force* would be so great. Or *Burai Fighter Deluxe*! Heck, even some utterly unassuming creations have proven to be far better than I ever would have given them credit for; I am pretty confident in saying that everyone reading this book would have gone to their graves never knowing that *Card Game* was actually pretty OK if not for Game Boy World.

Really, while this is a preposterously demanding and time-intensive project I've taken upon myself, Game Boy World owes its existence to everyone who has supported it on Patreon, who has bought this or the prior volume, or lent and donated software for archiving. So: Thank you, most sincerely, for making this book possible.

Game Boy World 1990 Vol. 1 covers January through the beginning of July 1990 — which is really only about a third of the system's 1990 releases. That mean there'll be two more books on the way. And, hopefully, just as many unknown gems just waiting to be unearthed. Please look forward to it.

Jeremy Parish
April 2016

JANUARY
1990

Wizards & Warriors X

Hero Shuugou! Pinball Party

World Bowling

Heiankyo Alien

Solar Striker
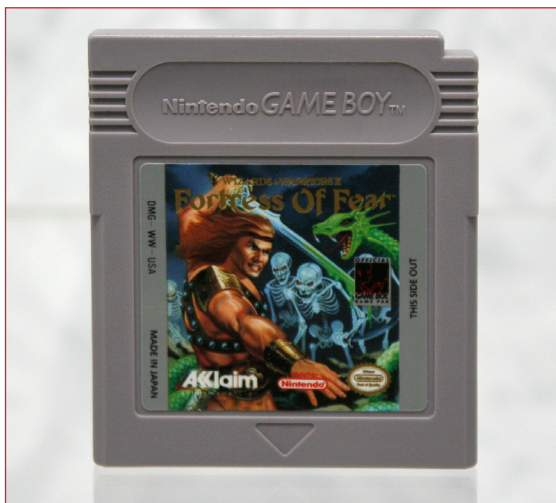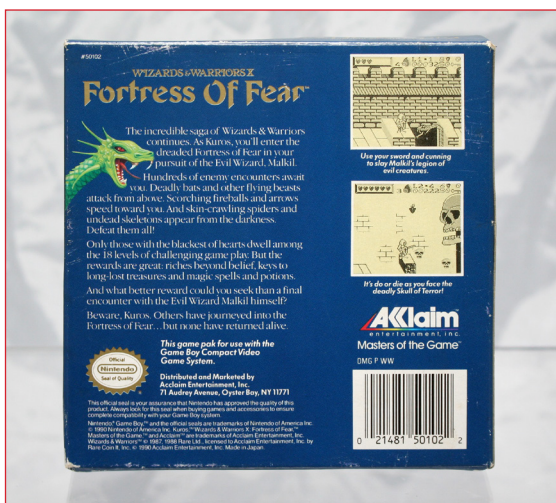
Wizards & Warriors X: Fortress of Fear

Developer: Rare • Publisher: Acclaim (U.S.) Nintendo (Europe)

Genre: Action/Platformer • Release: Jan. 1990 (U.S.) |1990 (Europe)

DMG-P-WW

Released in January of 1990, *Wizards & Warriors X: Fortress of Fear* helped usher in the new decade with… well, not exactly with style. But at least with something like a legacy.

Fortress of Fear was a sequel of sorts to 1989's *Ironsword: Wizards & Warriors II*. On the NES game's packaging, the part of protagonist Kuros had been played by romance cover icon Fabio, shortly before he inexplicably transcended into an international celebrity. However, while Fabio was ostensibly the player's avatar in *Ironsword*, *Fortress of Fear* did a more effective job of making them feel like Fabio. Specifically, like Fabio that one time a bird smacked him in the face while riding a roller coaster.

Yes, *Wizards & Warriors X* — whether that's the letter X or Roman numeral 10 remains unexplained — is the video game equivalent of being smashed in the face with a bird at high velocities. It is not a good game. In fact, it was arguably worse than anything that appeared on the system throughout 1989 (see *Game Boy World 1989* for more).

There had been some rough releases, to be sure. *Hyper Lode Runner* had no learning curve; *Castlevania: The Adventure* utterly failed to live up to its legacy. And poor *Shogi* involved such complex AI maneuvers that it nearly broke the Game Boy. But none of those games were legitimately *bad*. All of them offered some sort of redeeming factor; even the lackluster and badly dated *Baseball* managed to offer a decently entertaining two-player mode.

Fortress of Fear, however, offers nothing of value. Its graphics are probably its strongest point… and even those aren't particularly great. Plus, they compromise the gameplay. The gulf in quality between *Fortress of Fear* and its NES predecessors is as vast as the difference in quality between *Castlevania: The Adventure* and its own NES precursors. The problem is that *Wizards & Warriors* was a much lower point to fall from than Castlevania, one of the best series on NES. Its disappointing spinoff still turned out pretty decent. *Wizards & Warriors*, on the other hand, was solid B material. A drop from there made for a barely

passing grade, if that.

Fortress of Fear's baggage came in several forms, but perhaps worst of all is that it abandoned most of what made the NES games remarkable. Kuros' previous adventures had centered heavily around his mobility — his ability to leap and bound around the screen. The NES games featured large, multi-tiered stage designs, with an almost vertiginous sense of height in places. *Fortress of Fear*, on the other hand, played out as a very straightforward left-to-right side-scroller. "Variety" in this game came in the occasional chance to switch directions and scroll right-to-left. It offered very little verticality to speak of, and Kuros would actually take damage when he fell from too great a height.

That's especially infuriating in light of the fact that his world seems so cramped. *Fortress of Fear* represents a lot of Game Boy firsts, and one of them is that it's the first Game Boy title we've seen to suffer from what I'm going to call "Disproportionate NES Envy."

At 160x144 pixels, the Game Boy offered a much smaller screen resolution than the NES's 256x224. NES-style experiences simply couldn't translate to the Game Boy without some sort of compromise. In the case of *Super Mario Land* and *Castlevania The Adventure*, designers chose to compromise visual flash. Those games compressed their heroes to smaller sizes than NES fans were used to, resulting in less impressive looking games. However, by sacrificing graphical sizzle, those games managed to maintain playability on the smaller screen. The tinier heroes felt proportionate to the screen.

Castlevania had other issues to be sure, but it didn't feel cramped or suffocating. The system's other NES-inspired action games throughout 1989 made the same creative compromise as well: *Hyper Lode Runner*, *The Bugs Bunny Crazy Castle*, and so forth. With *Fortress of Fear*, though, developer Rare refused to compromise on graphical quality. Kuros looked like a dead ringer for his NES incarnation — heck, his NES sprite wore silver (which is to say, grey) armor, so the lack of color on Game Boy didn't

even really seem like much of a change for him.

But in maintaining his NES proportions, Kuros necessarily forced the world around him to become smaller. There were fewer pixels to either side of the screen, resulting in a more constrictive atmosphere, less visual information, less time to react to obstacles and hazards. This issue would affect many Game Boy titles in the coming years, including *Metroid II* and the *Mega Man* ports, and *Wizards & Warriors* laid out the failings and hazards of this design challenge with remarkable clarity. Its level designs didn't properly take into account the complications imposed by players' poor line of sight on the Game Boy's screen, and most monsters and traps appeared on screen with too little notice to allow for players to react.

Or maybe the designers *did* take Kuros' huge size into account and deliberately set out to exploit that fact to make *Fortress of Fear* unreasonably difficult. That could well be the case, given the sheer number of unfair death traps scattered throughout the levels. *Wizards & Warriors X* defines "cheap design"; its stages consist of inconveniently placed monsters that take entirely too many hits to kill. Everything moves at a rapid clip, and deadly projectiles constantly fly in from off-screen without warning.

It's the projectiles that make me suspect this whole thing is deliberate. They're scrupulously placed in the worst possible locations, usually around jumps or in conjunction with enemies, and consistently seem designed to force players to take an untelegraphed hit after committing to another action. These outrageous slings and arrows demand players memorize each and every stage layout, a need that becomes especially pressing in light of the fact that *Fortress of Fear* offers no continues. You have three lives, plus whatever extras you can scrounge along the way, and that's it.

Admittedly, the *Wizards & Warriors* series was never particularly about great or fair level design. The first NES game tended to feature unfair odds and slippery platforming. But it worked, because it was also quite forgiving — it
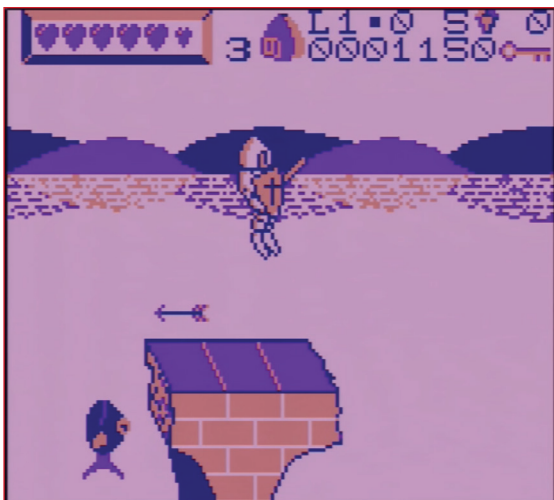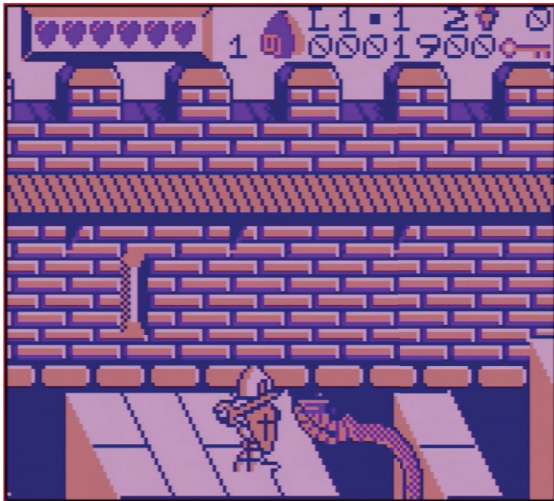
offered infinite continues, with the ability to resume play on the exact spot on which you'd died — and also because it incorporated a moderate attempt at creating greater depth of play. Kuros could collect permanent and semi-permanent power-ups as he advanced, eventually commanding quite an arsenal by the end of his quest.

Here, the shorter and more linear nature of the quest moots that. While you can find a few helpful items — namely the jump boots, which are essential for clearing certain gaps — they're temporary, and their presence feels perfunctory at best. The closest *Fortress of Fear* offers to real depth is the fact that you can sometimes jump over walls to find hidden rooms, or stand in certain locations to prompt timed platforms to rise from the depths and create a new path for you. Combined with the awkward controls, cramped screen proportions, and cheap memorization-driven level design, it hardly feels worth the trouble.

Fortress of Fear represented a number of firsts for the Game Boy platform, few of them particularly good. Which is a shame, because one of those was quite a notable first: It is believed to have been the first Game Boy title ever to have been developed, published, and released strictly in the West. Every Game Boy title to this point was produced in Japan and released there first as well — sometimes exclusively. *Wizards & Warriors*, of course, was created by British studio Rare and bankrolled by American publisher Acclaim.

Furthermore, it wasn't simply the first Game Boy title to hail from the West, but also the first not to see a Japanese version. The original *Wizards & Warriors* had actually made its way over to Famicom (as *Elrond no Densetsu*), but the Game Boy sequel didn't… and understandably so.

Sadly, being a Rare-developed game, the exact details and circumstances behind *Fortress of Fear*'s creation remain shrouded in mystery. So far as I can tell, they've never spoken about the design of the game, credited the creative staff, nor even answered whether it's called "*Wizards & Warriors X*" or "*Wizards & Warriors 10*." So why *did* the first-ever Western-developed Game Boy title turn

out to be so lackluster? All we can do is speculate, but my guess personally would be that it was created on a short timeline.

Nintendo has always put the Japanese market ahead of others. It's not hard to believe that Western developers didn't even get ahold of development kits for Game Boy until long after their Japanese counterparts. Rare had always excelled at rapid iteration, so it seems likely that they may have gotten their start on *Fortress of Fear* long after Konami and TOSE were already hip-deep in Game Boy development and simply banged out this project on a short timeline. The company worked in two modes in the '80s: Cutting-edge passion projects like *Battletoads* and *Cobra Triangle*, and quick licensed work for apathetic publishers who just wanted a quick buck. And we all know which of the two Acclaim specialized in.

The wicked unfairness and "gotcha" design of *Wizards & Warriors X* feels as though Rare, faced with the prospect of returning to an underpowered machine with poor graphical capabilities, reverted to the practices of their Spectrum days. The absolute lack of balancing or mercy here definitely feels like a throwback to the days of 8-bit microcomputing, where players were expected to struggle mightily for months in order to master a game.

That doesn't fly these days, though, and the frightful difficulty level of *Fortress of Fear* comes off as nothing so much as an attempt to pad a small and limited game. There's just not much substance to Rare's portable debut, nor many reasons to recommend it in this day and age. Game Boy's first game developed outside Japan, its first game of the '90s, proved to be lackluster and generally not much fun. Unfortunately, this was not so much a matter of Western developers coming to grips with the system was it was a taste of things to come. And not just for Rare, or Acclaim, or Western developers in general. With the arrival of 1990, the Game Boy gold rush was in on earnest, and as we'll soon see, the relatively high quality of 1989's games will soon be but a sweet memory.
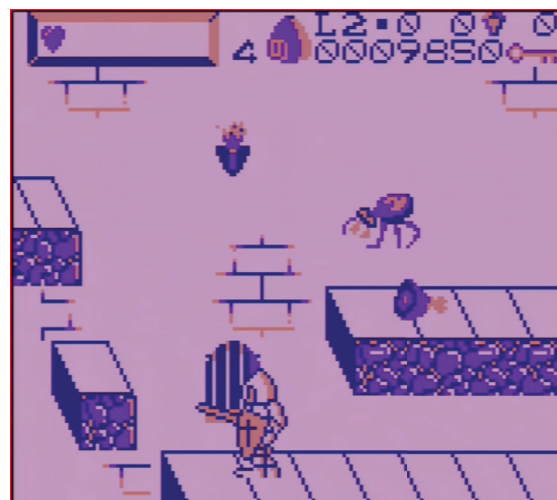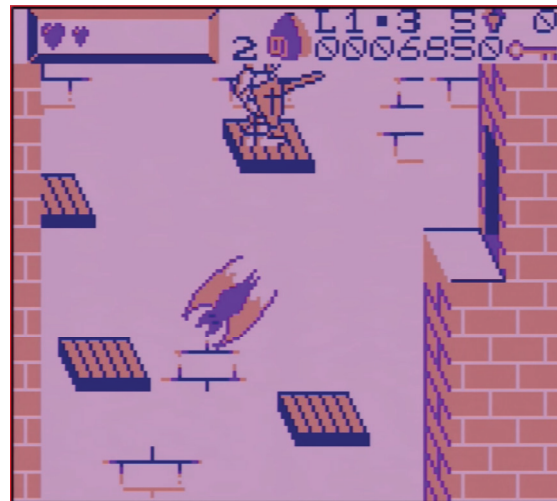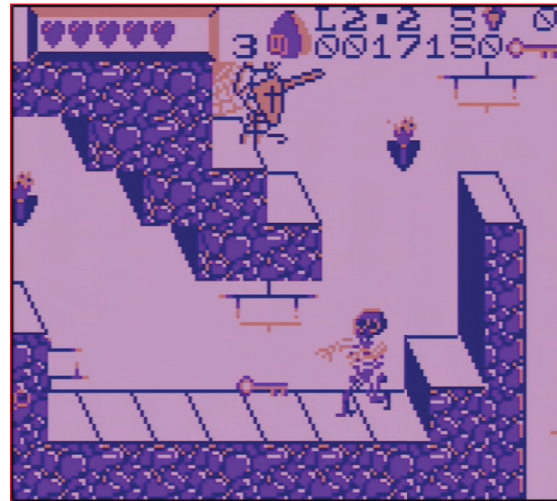
Hero Shuugou!! Pinball Party

ヒーロー集合!!ピンボールパーティ

Developer: Jaleco [presumed] • Publisher: Jaleco
Genre: Pinball • Release: Jan. 12, 1990 (Japan)
DMG-PPJ

My family didn't own game systems until after the Atari crash. We sat out most of the so-called "golden age" because the cost of consoles and computers at the time set them firmly in the "luxury goods" category. But my parents knew I had real enthusiasm for video games, so they did what they could. Generally, that involved purchasing inexpensive dedicated handheld systems.

We never owned a proper *Game & Watch*, but we did have Epoch's double knock-off of both *Game & Watch* and *Pac-Man*, *Epoch Man*. I also owned a few of those Mattel LED handheld sports games that came in plastic shells molded to resemble the paraphernalia of the sports they encompassed. Among those self-contained portable titles was one that I likely played more than the others combined: Parker Bros.' *Wildfire Pinball*. The copy we owned was beaten and worn, having been acquired second hand, most likely after being left behind at the end of the school year in the college dormitory my gransparents supervised.

The provenance of the game didn't really matter to me, though. The important thing was, I had a working pinball video game, and I played it obsessively. In fact, having cut my teeth on this electronic simulation, I eventually found true pinball tables too alien for my tastes.

Wildfire dates back to 1979, meaning it predated the *Game & Watch* series. And it predated the first true pinball game for a portable console — HAL's fantastic *Revenge of the Gator* (see *Game Boy World 1989*) — by a full decade. The thing is, though, aside from the wacky alligators, *Revenge of the Gator* wasn't really all that much more sophisticated than *Wildfire*. On its native hardware, it was arguably worse! Sure, it had more dynamic and variable ball behavior than was possible with *Wildfire*'s limited LED array. But thanks to the Game Boy's blurry screen, the ball was also much harder to keep track of, even in strong lighting conditions.

By necessity, then, *Revenge of the Gator* had keep things fairly simple. Its triple-decker screen design added a little complexity to the proceedings, and it had some fun
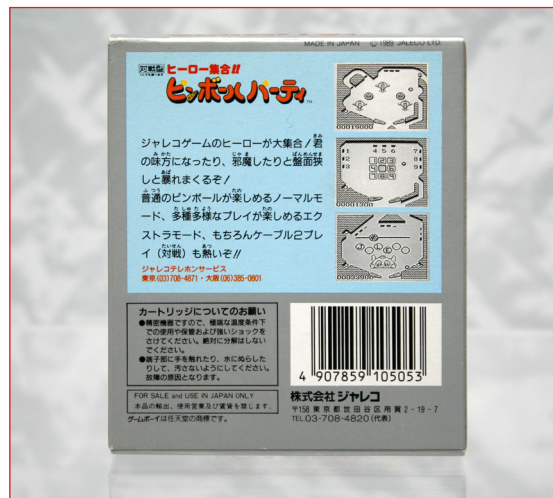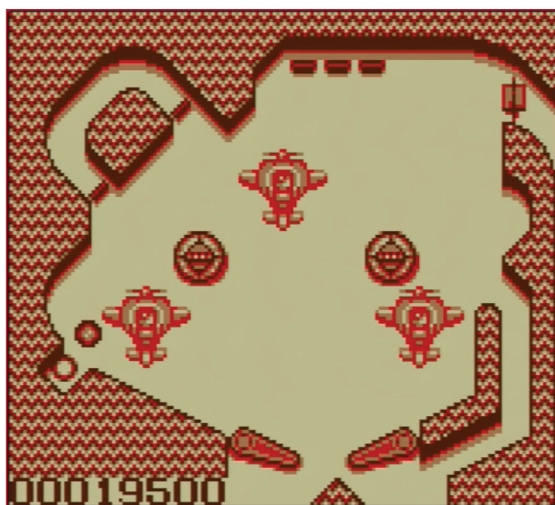
bonus modes. At its heart, though, Game Boy's first pinball game wasn't much more complex than an LED game from a decade prior. Nor, for that matter, was its second: *Jaleco's Hero Shuugou! Pinball Party*, released in Japan (and only Japan) in January 1990.

In keeping with the pinball table spirit, *Pinball Party* had its own specific theme to help distinguish it from other video pinball endeavors. You can probably guess that theme from the title, which translates roughly into "Heroes Assemble! Pinball Party": A gathering of Jaleco characters into a pinball table. It makes much more sense than the alligator theme running throughout *Revenge of the Gator*, that's for sure. It's basically *Mario Party*, before there was *Mario Party*... meaning there's only a single minigame.

The core Jaleco crew featured here includes Jaja-maru-kun, the eponymous hero of the Japan-only arcade action series that inspired *Retro Game Challenge*'s *Robot Ninja Haggleman* titles, and Rit, the heroine of *Rod-Land*, reimagined here as a shinto priestess for some reason. Also included are a pig that I presume to be from *Buta-san*, and a thing that almost but not quite resembles a car from *City Connection*. It's basically a whole lot of C-tier characters who never came to the U.S., hanging out in a C-tier pinball game that never came to the U.S.

Pinball Party's main mode uses the same tri-ple-decker table layout seen in *Revenge of the Gator*, with each failure dropping you progressively lower down the ta-ble. It's technically possible to climb back up to a previous screen, though terribly difficult. More interesting, however, is the Extra mode, in which you deal with more dynamic board hazards. While the Extra table is only two screens high versus the basic mode's three, it's far more dynamic.

The top half of the Extra table features the game's mascot — a leotard-glad magician's assistant whose name is never given — holding out a top hat from which a dragon occasionally emerges to produce a roaming monster. You can destroy these monsters by directing the pinball into them, which will give you a moment's breathing room, or

else you can simply drop to the lower screen to "reset" the creatures... though here, too, returning to the upper area can be a bit of a task. If you stick around too long without destroying the top hat monsters, eventually they'll snag on to one of your flippers and cause it to vanish, which ends your chances of entering the bonus rounds for that play.

The lower screen is far more wild, with a roulette feature that introduces some unpredictable modifiers. The weirdest is when the flippers disappear, replaced by a *Breakout* paddle — sometimes a normal paddle, sometimes a tether held up by Jajamaru and Rit. Further livening things up, you have the usual assortment of bonus goals, like knocking down bumpers to spell JALECO and, of course, a bevy of special stages.

Special stages essentially consist of pinball-themed minigames where you do things like defeat monsters or, yes, spell JALECO. All of this is fine, and in fact it would probably be legitimately fun if not for one crucial fact: *Pinball Party* is not very well-made.

You have to feel for *Pinball Party*; outside of platformers, pinball is the first genre to see a second entry on Game Boy... and unfortunately for Jaleco, the first game to come along was a high-water mark. *Revenge of the Gator* was limited, but within those boundaries it provided top-notch entertainment. *Pinball Party* does not.

The game's biggest shortcoming? The terrible ball physics. The pinball in this particular party does not behave consistently. Its collision detection is sloppy and unreliable; sometimes it passes partway into walls and objects, while at others it bounces or rolls a few pixels before it hits anything. Likewise, its momentum is impossible to predict. It sometimes barely moves, while other times it goes flying across the screen. You never really know which it'll be.

At the same time, despite the ball physics' Heisenberg-level degree of uncertainty, there are certain angles and paths that always seem to play out the same way every time. The ball will always fly from a certain flipper in a certain direction and carom off the wall at a certain
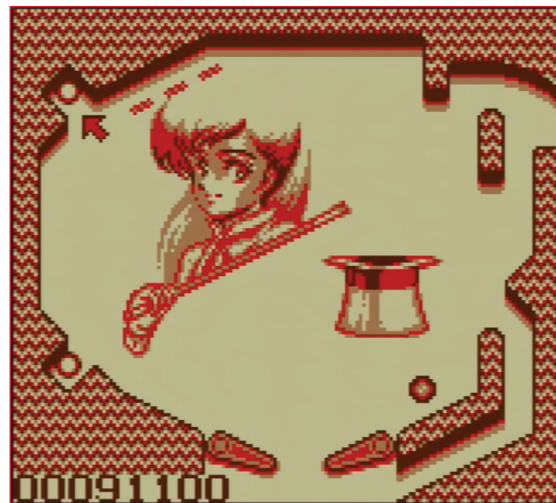
angle nearly every time. Compare this to the reliable, con-sistent, precision present in *Revenge of the Gator* and *Pinball Party*'s shortcomings become painfully glaring.

The awkward ball-handling is problem enough, but it'll really grind your gears when you activate special bonuses in the Extra game and suddenly the entire layout of the screen changes in the blink of an eye. While the transformation of the flippers into *Arkanoid*'s Vaus is a cool concept, in practice it's likely to ruin your game. It happens instantly, and suddenly the ball is no longer rolling toward the flippers but instead free-falling toward the bottom of the screen. In these moments, you have about a second, maybe two, to recognize the mode change and scoot the newly spawned paddle over to stop the ball from being lost. No warning, no mercy.

Pinball Party has some interesting ideas, but they're executed poorly in every instance. Again, it doesn't help that *Revenge of the Gator* already demonstrated how good a Game Boy pinball experience could be; if Jaleco had released this into a vacuum, it would probably be perfectly acceptable. But they didn't, and it's really not.

It seems almost unfair to hold this up against a similar game produced by HAL, because technical excel-lence has always been HAL's stock in trade. Remember, the company got its big break when its top programmer, Satoru Iwata, was summoned to help Nintendo figure out how to make its early NES games decent. By contrast, no one has ever looked to Jaleco for game production expertise. They turned out some good games over the years, no question, but those projects weren't exactly paragons of technical proficiency. For that matter, who knows if Jaleco was even the developer for this game? No external studio has been credited for *Pinball Party*, and the game has no credits that I can determine.

However, *Pinball Party* launched less than a month after another Jaleco pinball title: *Pinball Quest* for NES (which debuted in Japan on December 15, 1989). That particular game, it turns out, was produced by our friends

at TOSE (see *Game Boy World 1989*'s *Malibu Beach Volleyball* entry). Given that TOSE was a go-to for quick-and-dirty games, it would seem weird for the relatively ambitious *Pinball Quest* — which turned the pinball concept into a RPG-inspired adventure — to go to them while the more mundane *Pinball Party* would be an internal project.

Whatever the case, the close proximity of Jaleco's two pinball releases (the only two the company ever published) ultimately creates just another unflattering comparison for *Pinball Party*. It doesn't only stack up poorly against *Revenge of the Gator*; its mundane and uninspiring design compared to *Pinball Quest* really gets to the heart of the divide between the NES and Game Boy.

In the end, it doesn't matter all that much. *Pinball Party* never came to the U.S., long since having vanished — and justifiably so! — into the waves of obscurity. It's just another one of history's countless lost games, produced by a defunct publisher and lacking any particular value aside from the novelty of seeing obscure 8-bit characters in a different context than usual.

The legend of *Wildfire*

Parker Bros. took part in the late '70s LED handheld game craze, same as any other serious toy manufacturer. The company produced fewer of these devices than competitors like Mattel and Milton Bradley, but their efforts generally possessed more creativity than their rivals' rudimentary abstractions of professional sports. While Parker Bros. had its biggest hit in the burgundy multipurpose monolith known as Merlin, Wildfire pinball proved equally entertaining.

Wildfire came equipped with three buttons: One one each side to represent the paddles, and a third to work as the plunger. The plunger button stands as testament to the thoughtfulness Parker Bros. invested in the game; that function could just as easily have been assigned to the flipper buttons, but the designers added the expense of an extra electromechanical part to better simulate the pinball experience. And the plunger's mechanism has the kiss of authenticity: If you don't hold down the button for long enough, the pinball will fail to launch into the play field.

Considering the "ball" is a red light that can occupy one of about a dozen spots, and the four flippers on the field lack analog sensitivity — they're either on or off — Wildfire plays shockingly well. It's primitive, yes, and the internal speaker is jarringly loud, but it frankly makes for a better pinball simulation than Jaleco's Pinball Party. Wildfire may be rudimentary, but at least it feels consistent. There are no surprises in the game, no sense that poor programming cheated you out of a ball — just pure, straightforward action. Even in the olden days, the newfangled ways weren't always best.