

THE HISTORY OF METROIDVANIA

DECADE ONE: 1980-1990



A chronological journey through gaming's least linear format: The Action-RPG.

LIMITED
RUN

Exploring the first decade of inspirations and evolutions behind the metroidvania genre, from Z to A (Zork to A Boy and His Blob).

PRESS
RUN

By Jeremy Parish

Based on the YouTube video series *Metroidvania Works*
née Metroidvania Chronicles

Text, layout, and images by Jeremy Parish

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Previous page: A detail of a hand-drawn map of
Nintendo's *Metroid*, illustrated by the author.

FOREWORD: IT'S NOT MY FAULT

Listen: I did not come up with the word “metroidvania.” I accept no responsibility for the pervasive nature of the word in these modern times. Someone else made up the word, and I’m pretty sure I wasn’t the first to start tossing it around to describe any and every nonlinear, exploration-based platform action-adventure game. It’s just a coincidence that I happen to be the owner of the *metroidvania.com* domain name and that my name appears prominently in places like Wikipedia’s Metroidvania entry or on Reddit’s dedicated subreddit, *r/metroidvania*. Who can account for the myriad mysteries of the internet, really?

Rather than pointing fingers before we even get to the substance of this book, we should begin by defining what “metroidvania” actually means. The word practically belongs on a Rorschach test at this point. For some people, it means exclusively the games originally that originally summoned the word into existence more than two decades ago: Portable *Castlevania* games whose design and user interface call to mind Nintendo’s *Metroid* series. *Et voila*: Metroidvania.

For others, it has a more fluid definition. It may mean any 2D game that has a nonlinear structure. Maybe it needs to involve some sort of numeric statistics-oriented system derived from role-playing games. Maybe it has to feature some particular mechanical trait, such as a contiguous world design, which would rule out a game like *Clash at Demonhead*, whose fully interconnected world consists of a series of standalone “routes” rather than allowing players to roam from one end of the world to another without shifting visual format. Maybe it demands players empower their characters by collecting permanent upgrades and tools. Or maybe it’s just a nebulous catch-all that can even encompass 3D games that involve some degree of backtracking, like *Batman: Arkham Asylum* or *Dark Souls II*.

On the other hand, maybe it’s just a stupid non-word whose only purpose is to send internet prescriptivists into an apoplectic tizzy and write embittered social media posts wishing ill on me for inventing it. (Did I mention that I did not come up with the word Metroidvania? I feel that point merits repetition.)

So, with that out of the way, let’s talk about what the word Metroidvania means in the context of this particular book, *Metroidva-*

nia: The First Decade. Well. Truth be told, the entire point of this book is about figuring that out. Or rather, it’s about tracing the origins of the games that *do* fall under the term’s umbrella, whether *Arkham Asylum* or *Castlevania: Aria of Sorrow*. I should stress here and now that none of those games actually appear in this volume. In fact, this book doesn’t even cover the first games that could arguably qualify as proper takes on the broad definition of “Metroidvania,” *Super Metroid* and *Castlevania: Symphony of the Night*.

No, those are for future volumes; I envision this *Metroidvania* book project as a three-volume series, assuming people choose to pick up this one. This will be a long, leisurely stroll through video game history, and this first volume encompasses the 1980s. Rather than documenting robust, latter-day Metroidvania efforts, my goal here instead is to touch on the seminal works that culminated in the Metroidvania genre (as it were). That includes creative dead-ends and forgotten efforts, and it also encompasses action-RPGs. After all, *Symphony of the Night* director Koji Igarashi has stated that he took more influence for the design and structure of that game from *The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past* than he did from the *Metroid* series. And that means you can’t establish a proper understanding of what it means to be a Metroidvania without also dissecting the games that built up to that third entry in the *Zelda* franchise.

Again, the “decade” in question for *Metroidvania: The First Decade* is the 1980s, working from the technical definition of decade. Which is to say, 1981-1990. An era of rapid and radical video game hardware and software evolution, which you can see here as the chronology begins with *Zork* (a text-based adventure game) and wraps with *Metal Gear 2: Solid Snake* (arguably the most refined and sophisticated work ever to appear on an 8-bit gaming platform). In between, you’ll find forgotten innovators like *Exile* (both of ’em), cult favorites like *The Guardian Legend*, and all-time classics like *Pitfall!* and *The Legend of Zelda*. Metroidvania—or at least this collection of proto-Metroidvania works—contains multitudes.

No, I did not invent the word Metroidvania. But I wish I had.

Jeremy Parish
March 2024

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PROLOGUE



The game above is *Castlevania: Symphony of the Night*. Many people consider it one of the greatest video games ever made. It is the definitive example of a metroidvania game. The player controls their character, Alucard, as if he were part of an action game, but he also benefits from permanent character upgrades—new skills, greater strength, improved weapons and armor—as he progresses through his adventure. And that progression doesn’t happen in the traditional video game sense, where players complete a stage and move along to another, never looking back. Alucard has to traverse his father’s castle methodically, combing its corridors in search of new passages and the tools to open up new areas.

This is the heart of the metroidvania concept: Exploring a virtual world while gathering the strength and items you need in order to further expand your ability to explore. Metroidvanias combine the essence of three different established video game genres:

- Adventure games
- Role-playing games
- Action games

How did they those very different styles of game come together to create the likes of *Symphony of the Night*? And how have other games built on *Symphony*’s concepts to further expand the definition of metroidvania? This is the question at the heart of this book and the (hopefully) two volumes to follow in a few years. Evolution is always a messy process, and that holds true for metroidvania evolution every bit as much as it did the sequence of events turned tyrannosaurs into parrots (though hopefully with fewer extinction-level catastrophes). *The History of Metroidvania* doesn’t only concern itself with side-scrolling action games that have role-playing hooks; it also dwells on role-playing, adventure, and action-RPG games and the way those formats developed over time and eventually converged to give us the metroidvania. Because this volume in particular address the metroidvania’s “prehistory,” there’s a heavy focus on action games with RPG elements as well as action-RPGs. These are not the same thing, somehow.

In any case, it’s somehow fitting that this text begins with a game consisting entirely of text....

METROIDVANIA TIMELINE

1980 AND BEFORE

By most measures, the world's first video game came into being in 1962. *Spacewar!* was created by a bunch of model railroad aficionados—although this may not sound the most likely group of people to create an entire medium, bear in mind that these particular model railroad fanatics belonged to a club at M.I.T. dedicated to exploring the absolute boundaries of the pastime. They used their electric engineering knowhow to build incredibly elaborate mechanical systems with which to control their miniature trains and the scale-model environments that surrounded them. That is to say: They applied sophisticated engineering skills to the concept of play. If that's not a DNA-level description of video games, what is?

Spacewar! was very different than the commercial products it helped inspire. For one thing, it was a collaborative venture. Once the foundation of the game was laid down—a pair of spaceships attempting to gun one another down in the inky void of the cosmos—fans of the game began contributing their own embellishments to the code. Most of these had to do not with the spaceships but rather the universe around them: Add-on *Spacewar!* modules incorporated highly accurate star fields and a central gravity well that affected the ships' movements to the screen.

In a way, this means that the spirit of the metroidvania genre loomed large over video gaming right from the start. Once *Spacewar!*'s contributors figured out the mechanics of shooting, they began thinking about the world in which the action took place—and then they began to explore how the world could interact with the actions. The first proper metroidvania—*Castlevania: Symphony of the Night* for Sony PlayStation—made its debut in 1997, exactly a quarter-century after *Spacewar!* first distracted M.I.T. grad students from their dissertations. And yet, the throughline between tiny ships sniping at one another and the son of Dracula trying to put a stop to his father's predations on humans is much shorter than you might imagine. The ships in *Spacewar!* had to use the stars to track their movements as they maneuvered around the sun and its gravity well; Alucard had to unravel the convolutions of his father's castle in order to confront his father in the heart of the labyrinthine corridors. Video games have always expected players to pay attention to virtual worlds. Metroidvania games simply make a bigger deal of this element than most.

Video games were slow to develop in the wake of *Spacewar!*, mainly because you could only find computers in military labs and college campuses. They cost millions of dollars, and computing time was too precious (read: expensive) to squander on games. But the 1970s saw video games enter the larger world through several vectors. Arcade games appeared, built and distributed on the bones of existing location-based amusement vending networks (pinball and jukeboxes). Home games appeared through purpose-built devices that inexpensively recreated arcade experiences in dedicated machines and, later, through consoles that accepted interchangeable cartridges. And home computers made their first appearance, reaching millions of families and putting electronic games within reach of the average consumer. And the big academic mainframes evolved, too, manifesting in networked systems like PLATO, which ended up serving as home to some of the most groundbreaking video games of all time—games that established the baseline for numerous genres.

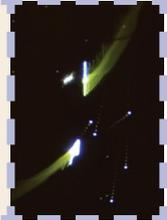
With so many different avenues becoming available for play, it didn't take long before the medium at large figured out the basics—how should video games play?—and began focusing on the player's relationship to the world. By 1980, the principles of exploration and survival that define metroidvanias and action-RPGs were set. *M*

TIMELINE OF EVENTS:

1962

Spacewar!

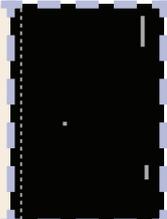
The first video game, the point where it all began. *Spacewar!* didn't have much to do with metroidvanias and action-RPGs, but where would we be without it?



1972

Pong

The first commercial game hit, this simple, competitive coin-op interpretation of table tennis introduced the public to the concept of computer gaming and helped establish a new medium.



Magnavox Odyssey

The first home video game system, the Odyssey contained several rudimentary games that relied on screen overlays and circuit jumpers to operate—clumsy, but a revolution all the same.



1974

PLATO

This networked computer platform put mainframe power in the hands of normal students. Naturally, they used it to make games, inventing multiple genres (including RPGs) in the process.



1975

Home Pong

Atari brought home their arcade smash in the form of a low-cost TV-based device dedicated to playing *Pong* and nothing but *Pong*. Within a year, the market was flooded with knockoffs.



NOTABLE FOR: CREATING A PERSISTENT SPACE THAT DEMANDED EXPLORATION AND MAPPING

```

ZORK: THE GREAT UNDERGROUND EMPIRE
PART I
COPYRIGHT (C) 1980 BY INFOCOM, INC
RIGHTS RESERVED.
ZORK IS A TRADEMARK OF INFOCOM, INC
RELEASE 15 / SERIAL NUMBER ???????

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NEST OF HOUSE
YOU ARE STANDING IN AN OPEN FIELD W
OF A WHITE HOUSE, WITH A BOARDED FR
DOOR.
THERE IS A SMALL MAILBOX HERE.

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NUM OF RAINBOW SCORE 0/24
FROM HERE THAT THE MAIN FLOW FROM
ARAGAIN FALLS TWISTS ALONG A PASSAGE
HIGH IT IS IMPOSSIBLE TO ENTER. BELOW
YOU IS THE CANYON BOTTOM. ABOVE YOU IS
A GREY CLIFF, WHICH APPEARS CLIMBABLE.
DOWN
CANYON BOTTOM
YOU ARE BENEATH THE WALLS OF THE RIVER
CANYON WHICH MAY BE CLIMBABLE HERE. THE
LARGER PART OF THE RUNOFF OF ARAGAIN
FALLS FLOWS BY BELOW. TO THE NORTH IS A
NARROW PATH.
END OF RAINBOW
YOU ARE ON A SMALL, ROCKY BEACH ON THE
CONTINUATION OF THE FRIGID RIVER PAST
THE FALLS. THE BEACH IS NARROW DUE TO
THE PRESENCE OF THE WHITE CLIFFS. THE
RIVER CANYON OPENS HERE AND SUNLIGHT
SHINES IN FROM ABOVE. A RAINBOW CROSSES
OVER THE FALLS TO THE EAST AND A NARROW
PATH CONTINUES TO THE SOUTHWEST.

```

ZORK I:

THE GREAT UNDERGROUND EMPIRE

PLATFORM: MAINFRAME AND PERSONAL COMPUTERS
DEV: INFOCOM | PUB: INFOCOM
INITIAL RELEASE: 1977 / DEC. 1980

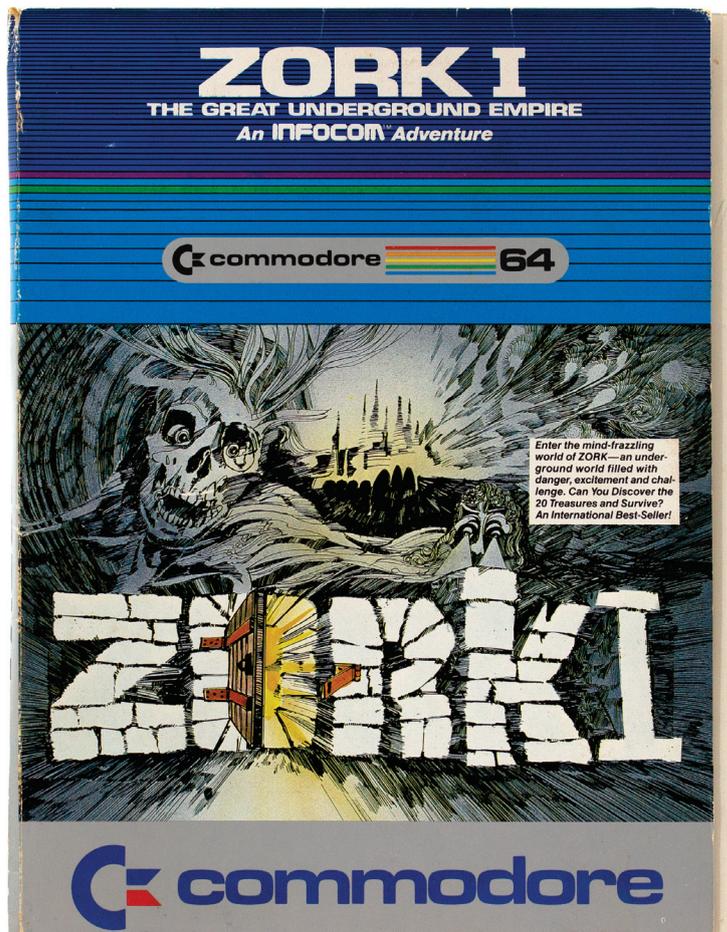
GREAT UNDERGROUND IMPERIAL ORIGINS

Every story has a beginning, and every author has to drop a pin *somewhere* on the map of history and proclaim, “Here’s where it all starts.” For the story of the metroidvania sub-genre, that map pin bears the name *Zork*. On its surface, *Zork* bears almost zero resemblance to the kind of game you usually find under the metroidvania header. It involves no platform jumping, no real combat—no action at all, in fact. You don’t kill monsters to gain levels, and you don’t equip progressively better gear to strengthen your protagonist. There’s certainly no auto-map. Basically, none of the features that normally go to make up the word “metroidvania” have any place here.

That is, with one exception. A lone exception that sits at the very core of the metroidvania concept even more so than the 2D barrel-hopping of *Donkey Kong* or the shooty platform action of *Ghosts ‘N Goblins*: The adventure game genre got its proper start here with this text-driven trip into an underground empire.

Zork sends players wandering through caverns abandoned to time and forgotten by all but a handful of monsters (and one annoyingly persistent thief). At the time of *Zork*’s inception, no such designation or genre as “adventure games” even existed. The game’s creators, a group of programmers from Massachusetts Institute of Technology, had originally set out to create a video *role-playing game*, not an adventure. In a sense, they succeeded.

Zork stands apart from other early computer RPGs due to its creators’ focus. Most computerized takes on the RPG in the 1970s and ’80s (and, for that matter, now) revolved around the statistical elements of role-playing: Experience points, gear attributes, and random, abstracted dice roll values. The ur-RPG, *Dungeons & Dragons*, evolved from miniature war games along the lines of *Warhammer*. When the genre made the transition to computers... well, you know, computers can’t tell stories, but they are really good at numbers. A random number generator works just as well as dice. And it’s so much less trouble to program all those complex



```

#003511 SCATCHES (PERHAPS MADE BY AN AXE) MARK
#003512 THE WALLS.
#003513 A NASTY-LOOKING TROLL, BRANDISHING A
#003514 BLOODY AXE, BLOCKS ALL PASSAGES OUT OF
#003515 THE ROOM.
#003516 YOUR SWORD HAS BEGUN TO GLOW VERY
#003517 BRIGHTLY.
#003518 THE FLAT OF THE TROLL'S AXE HITS YOU
#003519 DELICATELY ON THE HEAD, KNOCKING YOU
#003520 OUT.
#003521 CONQUERING HIS FEARS, THE TROLL PUTS YOU
#003522 TO DEATH.
#003523 IT APPEARS THAT THAT LAST BLOW WAS TOO
#003524 MUCH FOR YOU. I'M AFRAID YOU ARE DEAD.
#003525
#003526 **** YOU HAVE DIED ****
#003527
#003528 NOW, LET'S TAKE A LOOK HERE. WELL, YOU
#003529 PROBABLY DESERVE ANOTHER CHANCE. I CAN'T
#003530 QUITE FIX YOU UP COMPLETELY, BUT YOU
#003531 CAN'T HAVE EVERYTHING.
#003532 FOREST
#003533 >
    
```

```

#003534 SOUTH END OF THE ROOM IS AN OPEN DOOR
#003535 (ALSO COVERED WITH PAINT). AN EXTREMELY
#003536 DARK AND NARROW CHIMNEY LEADS UP FROM A
#003537 FIREPLACE; ALTHOUGH YOU MIGHT BE ABLE TO
#003538 GET UP IT, IT SEEMS UNLIKELY YOU COULD
#003539 GET BACK DOWN.
#003540 LOOSELY ATTACHED TO A WALL IS A SMALL
#003541 PIECE OF PAPER.
#003542 >READ PAPER
#003543
#003544 CONGRATULATIONS!
#003545 YOU ARE THE PRIVILEGED OWNER OF A
#003546 GENUINE ZORK GREAT UNDERGROUND EMPIRE
#003547 (PART I), A SELF CONTAINED AND SELF
#003548 MAINTAINING UNIVERSE. IF USED AND
#003549 MAINTAINED IN ACCORDANCE WITH NORMAL
#003550 OPERATING PRACTICES FOR SMALL UNIVERSES
#003551 ZORK WILL PROVIDE MANY MONTHS OF
#003552 TROUBLE-FREE OPERATION. PLEASE CHECK
#003553 WITH YOUR DEALER FOR PART II AND OTHER
#003554 ALTERNATE UNIVERSES.
    
```

conditional rules and combat modifiers than it is to commit them to memory! Thus, the computer RPG became an exercise in designing systems and processes, an excuse for combat and stat growth

Yet numbers ultimately comprise only half of the full RPG experience—maybe less than that, really, if you really want to get to the heart of what role-playing truly means. A great RPG session turns on the art of storytelling, and it lives and dies by the skills of its narrator. Will the dungeon master just send a group of friends through a combat meat grinder, or will they regale the party with an intricately constructed tale?

The problem with computers is that for all their skill with numbers, they're not very flexible and lack any real spark of invention. Even if you believe the present-day hype about artificial intelligence, computers ultimately can only recompile existing data or churn through the text it's fed. So what happens when your party wanders off in a weird direction that the game master never accounted for? A talented GM will improvise and come up with something new, maybe even something better than they had originally intended. On the other hand, a computer will either churn out filler or simply give an error message before forcing you back on track.

Zork's authors—Bruce Daniels, Dave Lebling, Marc Blank, and Tim Anderson—aimed to solve that question by creating an interactive text parser that could divine a player's intent and respond with natural language. Of course, what they came up with was a matter of simple conditional statements, but it felt convincing enough to work.

Zork was no ELIZA, but it was sarcastic, descriptive, and adaptive. It painted pictures with words, gave players enticing clues, and let them figure out the world around them. It could remember what players had acquired, what they had done in the world, and what challenges they'd overcome. And, if they said something improper, it would respond with a chiding or even mocking response.

However, it's the world of *Zork* that matters most for our purposes. While *Zork* plays nothing at all like a metroidvania game in the "2D action platformer" sense, what those four geniuses at MIT created here was, for all intents and purposes, gaming's first non-linear, persistent world that gated player progression by means of exploration and the application of tools. The workings of *Zork* don't map directly onto something like *Castlevania: Symphony of the Night*; some obstacles in the world work more as riddles than as tests of how effectively you've gathered equipment and can put them to use. For instance, no item will allow you to bypass the Cyclops; instead,

you simply need to figure out (somehow) that you need to speak the word "Ulysses" to get past him. In other areas, though, your advancement hinges upon determining out how the items you've collected in the course of your wandering can be put to use in order to grant you access to new places. Need to descend a high, steep rise? Maybe that rope will do the trick. Need to get down a river? Well, you may have found a pump and a pile of plastic. What happens if you combine the two? And doesn't that shovel seem like it would be good for digging in the sand?

Zork works best when it combines puzzle-solving with your inventory—like any good adventure game, really. Can't figure out how to open the locked treasure egg without shattering it? Perhaps you should give it to someone whose vocation suggests they might be adept at picking locks.

Like most games of its vintage, *Zork* does rely somewhat on unintuitive solutions and sometimes even pure guesswork. Particularly annoying is the thief, whom you need for certain solutions (like the treasure egg) but who has the potential to completely ruin your game if he randomly steals the wrong item or lucks into surviving your confrontation with him.

But, you know, those are the breaks with pioneering works. *Zork's* fundamental innovations made it one of the most influential games of all time; even people who have never even heard of the game draw on the concepts and mechanics it inspired. Of course, *Zork* had its own predecessors; besides *D&D*, its creators also looked for inspiration to earlier works like William Crowther's *Colossal Cave Adventure*, aka *ADVENT*. *Zork's* creators drew heavily on that game's cavernous structures and text-based parser when building their own world to explore.

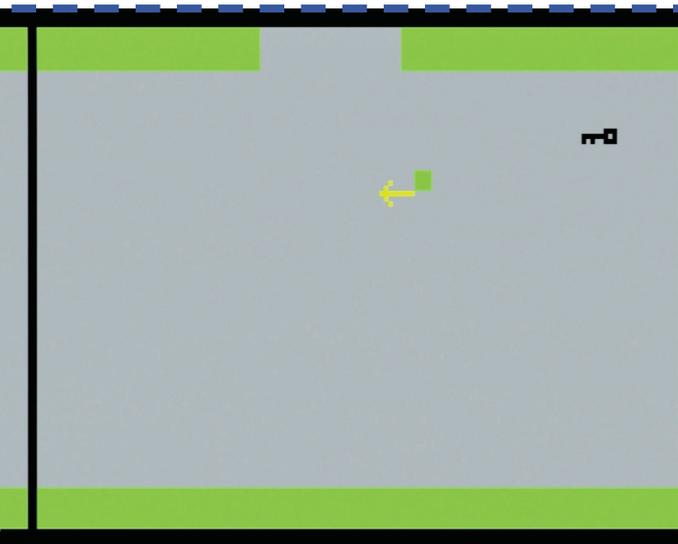
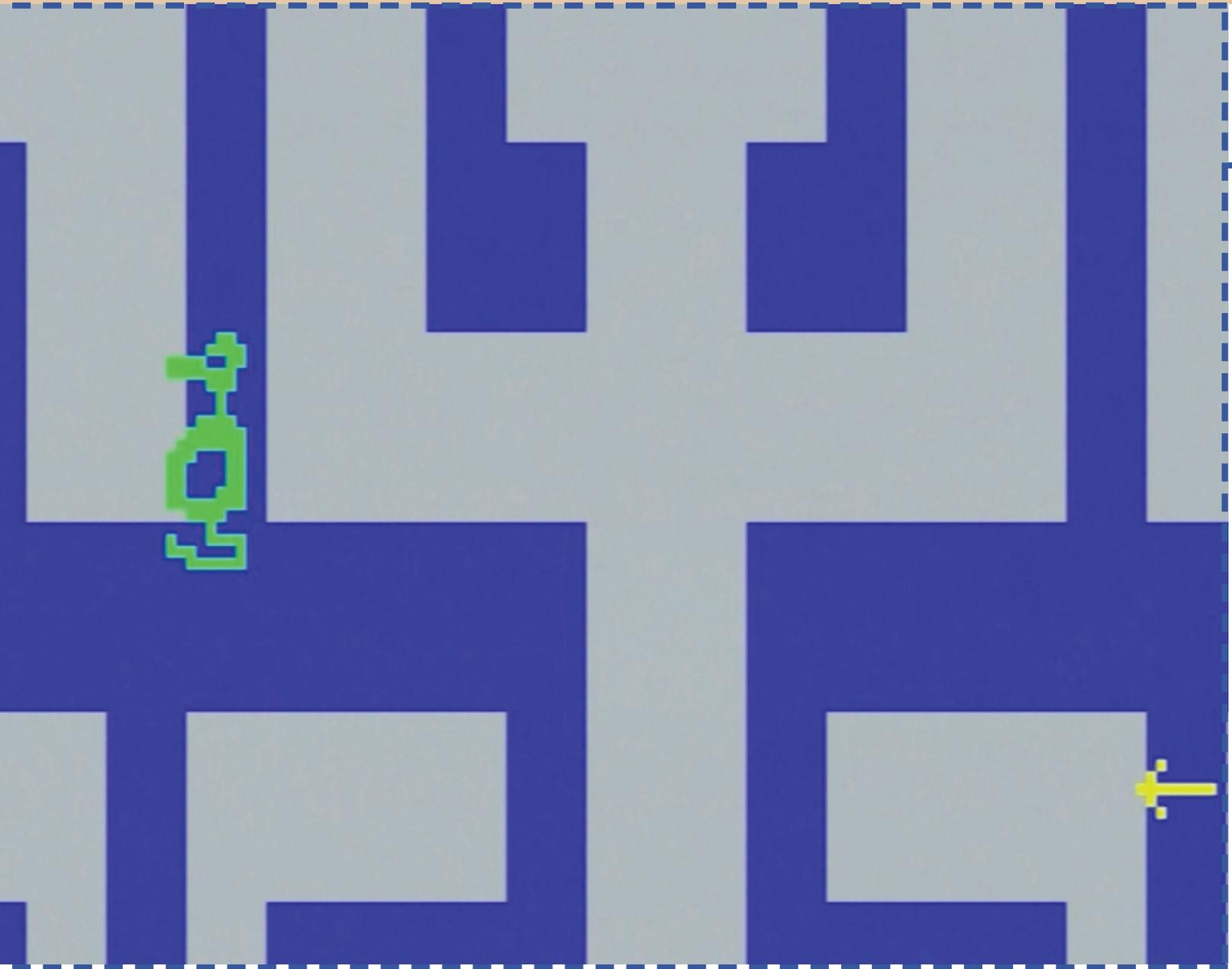
Still, *Zork* is where I've chosen to draw a line in the sand as the starting point for this particular historiography, simply because the contiguous world contained in the ruins of its Great Underground Empire was so much more intricate and persistent than the real-world caves mimicked by *ADVENT*. Solving *Zork* relied far more on player ingenuity and the creative application of tools and equipment, as well. There was even that meager little bit of combat with the wandering thief, which involved knowing your opponent's weak point—namely, greed. While limited in many ways and by no means an action adventure game, *Zork* introduced to the medium a number of fundamental concepts that would become integral to the oddball little sub-genre we call "metroidvania." **M**

| Entrance to Hades | Score: 84 | Moves: 108 | Studio | Score: 44 | Moves: 27 | Entrance to Hades |
|---|-----------|------------|---|-----------|-----------|---|
| The bell suddenly becomes red hot and falls to the ground. The wraiths, as if paralyzed, stop their jeering and slowly turn to face you. On their ashen faces, the expression of a long-forgotten terror takes shape. In your confusion, the candles drop to the ground (and they are out). | | | Your sword is no longer glowing. | | | The bell suddenly becomes red hot and falls to the ground. The wraiths, as if paralyzed, stop their jeering and slowly turn to face you. On their ashen faces, the expression of a long-forgotten terror takes shape. In your confusion, the candles drop to the ground (and they are out). |
| Light candles. Light candles. Light candles. | | | An art gallery. | | | Get candles. Light match. Light candles. |
| One of the matches starts to burn. | | | This is an art gallery. Most of the paintings have been stolen by vandals with exceptional taste. The vandals left through either the north or west exits. Fortunately, there is still one chance for you to be a vandal, for on the far wall is a painting of unparalleled beauty. | | | One of the matches starts to burn. |
| (With the match) The candles are lit. | | | Get (painting) taken. | | | (With the match) The candles are lit. |
| The flames flicker wildly and appear to dance. The earth beneath your feet trembles, and your legs nearly buckle beneath you. The spirits cower at your unearthly power. | | | In studio | | | The flames flicker wildly and appear to dance. The earth beneath your feet trembles, and your legs nearly buckle beneath you. The spirits cower at your unearthly power. |
| The match has gone out. | | | This appears to have been an artist's studio. The walls and floors are plattered with paints of 69 different colors. Strangely enough, nothing of value is hanging here. At the south end of the room is an open door (also covered with paint). A dark and narrow chimney leads up from a fireplace; although you might be able to get up it, it seems unlikely you could get back down. | | | The match has gone out. |
| Read book | | | Loosely attached to a wall is a small piece of paper. | | | Read book |
| Each word of the prayer reverberates through the cavern, and the spirits, sensing a greater power, flee through the walls. | | | | | | Each word of the prayer reverberates through the cavern, and the spirits, sensing a greater power, flee through the walls. |



THIS PAGE: A DETAIL OF THE GREAT UNDERGROUND EMPIRE MAP INCLUDED WITH CERTAIN EDITIONS OF ZORK

NOTABLE FOR: DISTILLING THE ADVENTURE GENRE INTO SIMPLE ACTION



ADVENTURE

PLATFORM: ATARI 2600
DEV: ATARI | PUB: ATARI
INITIAL RELEASE: JAN. 1980

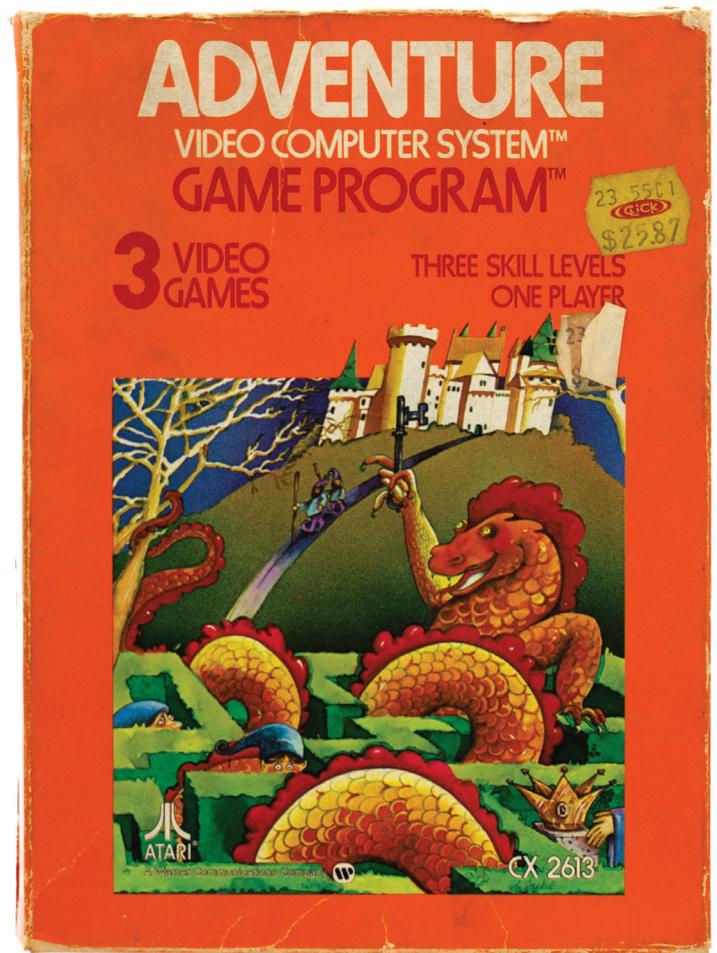
IF THERE'S A GRUNDLE IN YOUR HEDGEROW

You can't really talk about *Zork*—especially with regard to its influence over exploratory action games—without also discussing that game's flip side: Atari's *Adventure* for the 2600 console. If *Zork* resulted from game designers who made an early attempt at transforming a tabletop RPG experience along the lines of *Dungeons & Dragons* into electronic format, *Adventure* represented an effort to distill the concept even further. Not just into a video game, but even more specifically into an action game.

The Implementers originally coded *Zork* for mainframe: That is, networked computers with vastly more computing and memory resources than personal computers of the era could even begin to hope to offer. Indeed, *Zork*'s eventual home release had to be slimmed down significantly, and much of its 1981 sequel (*Zork II*) consisted of material that the Implementers incorporated into their original version of the game but had to trim in order to squeeze their adventure onto floppy disks.

Adventure's designer Warren Robinett, on the other hand, had to deal with the consumer computing constraints of the 1970s from the very inception of his project. As an Atari employee in the company's console products division, he couldn't even take advantage of the relative luxuriousness offered by 8-bit microcomputers like the Apple II—or even Atari's own machines, the 400 and 800. As an Atari 2600 game, *Adventure* had to fit within a meager 4KB of code, a vastly smaller space than the several hundred KB or floppy capacity that contained *Zork*'s home incarnation. As such, *Adventure* was fundamentally constrained in terms of scale, and even in its interface. Where players could interact with *Zork* by typing fragments of English grammar by way of a full computer keyboard, *Adventure* had to be controlled with a single one-button joystick.

So, Robinett chose to make the most of what the Atari did offer: Namely, colorful graphics and responsive controls. While these were no great shakes by today's standards, they got the job done.



Adventure players didn't *have* to visualize *Zork's* maze of twisty passages, all alike; they could simply head north into the confusing multi-screen maze area and begin navigating their way around the game's maze. Nor did they need to figure out arcane tools and deliberately vague sequences of actions for killing foes; it seemed fairly obvious that you could use the sword to take care of most foes. The question, of course, was whether or not you could coax enemies into range while you actually had those lethal items in your possession....

Much of *Adventure* works similarly to *Zork*, albeit simplified. For instance, it lacks *Zork's* inventory system, and you can't type a simple command to take stock of your possessions. Nevertheless, *Adventure* still makes toting objects around with you one of the key components of your quest. In this case, though, you can only carry a single item at a time, and you need to drop the item currently in your grasp in order to pick up another. This really isn't fundamentally different from the limited carrying capacity *Zork's* hero had to contend with; it's simply a more severe approach.

Perhaps more importantly, despite its harsh limitations, *Adventure* nevertheless maintains *Zork's* sense of persistence.

Items remain in the spot where you dropped them during the course of your current quest. This allows you to return to claim them as needed, turning micromanagement into a critical strategy: Which item do you need for the moment, and how quickly can you return to the location of another weapon or tool in order to effect a quick swap?

Adventure even incorporates randomness as a play factor, one that works similarly to *Zork's* thief: A bat flutters around the game world, grabbing items without warning... including, at times, whatever the hero has in his hands. If you're very unlucky, the bat will grab, say, the Chalice, which it will then replace with, for example, a

deadly dragon that will instantly slay your adventurer. It's possible to manipulate the bat, but its presence keeps players on their toes.

And, like *Zork*, *Adventure* doesn't feel the need to go out of its way to explain itself. The main objective of the game—retrieving a Chalice and carrying it to the Yellow Castle—is described in the instruction manual, but the actual process of making that happen is left charmingly enigmatic. Your hero, depicted on screen as a small square block of color, begins south of the Yellow Castle. It's on you to figure out what to do from there.

In the easiest game variant, the task at hand is fairly self-explanatory. You can see a yellow key beside the Yellow Castle, and

this tool unlocks the castle's door, which grants you access to an arrow—actually a sword—a weapon that can frighten away the dragons that lurk nearby. This play mode still takes a little effort to complete, but not so much that a modern player wouldn't be able to decrypt the process and master it within a few attempts.

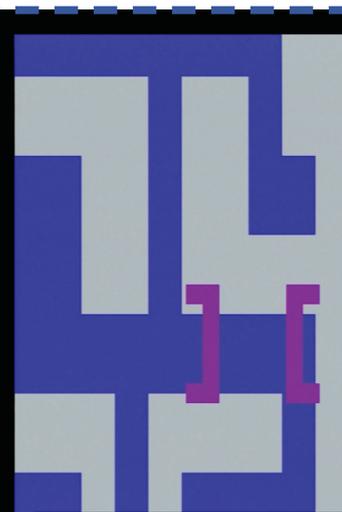
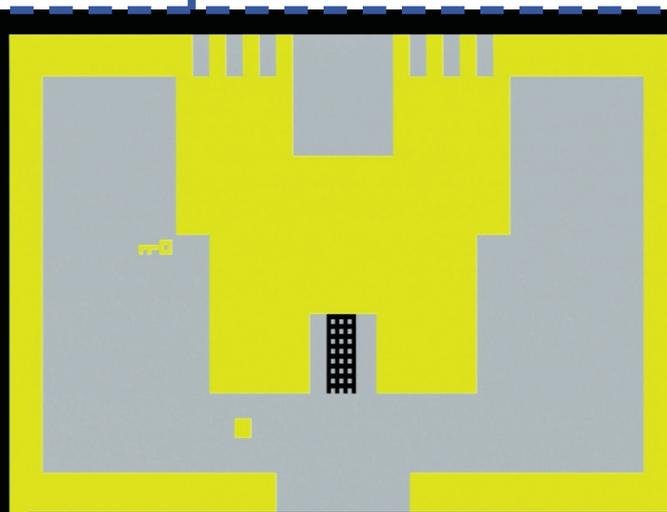
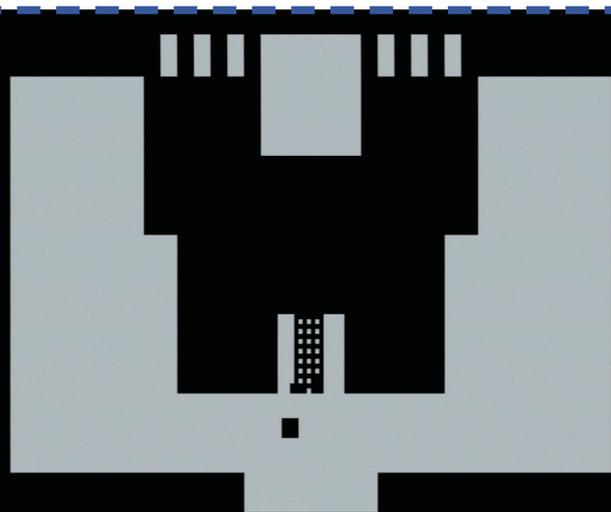
It's really in the game's more difficult variant that you begin to see the interlocking map design that would come to define metroidvania games taking shape. Again, your goal remains simple: Take the chalice to the Yellow Castle. But in the harder mode, this isn't so easy a task. The yellow key no longer sits beside the Yellow Castle; instead, you have to find it tucked away in a maze to the south.

The Chalice itself sits behind the gate of the Black Castle in both variants, but in the harder version you need to find the black key in a maze inside the White Castle, and you can't enter that structure until you traverse the main maze in order to find the white key.

This sort of backtracking to unlock hidden areas is a mainstay of metroidvania games. While *Adventure* admittedly lacks the permanent power-ups of something like *Metroid*, the concept remains sound here even in this primal form. *M*

ADVENTURE WORKS

SIMILARLY TO ZORK, ALBEIT IN A SIMPLIFIED FORM. IT LACKS ZORK'S INVENTORY SYSTEM, AND YOU CAN'T TYPE A SIMPLE COMMAND TO TAKE STOCK OF YOUR POSSESSIONS, EVEN THOUGH TOTING OBJECTS IS A KEY COMPONENT OF THE QUEST.



THE BEFORE TIMES

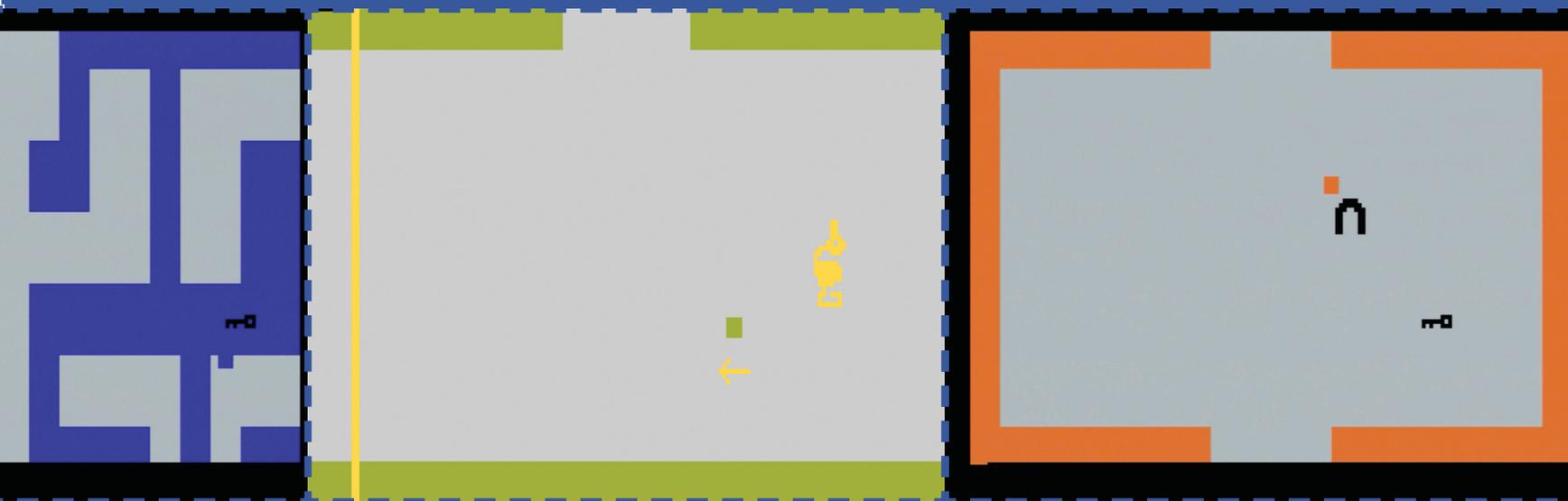
Metroidvania: *The First Year* does not specifically chronicle firsts in video gaming but rather looks at first influential works, rarely looking back further than 1980. When you venture into the video game history of the 1970s (and even earlier), “firsts” become difficult to pin down thanks to the largely non-commercial and inconsistently documented nature of the medium in those days. Many of the games appearing in this book can trace the origins of their key design concepts back into the primal soup of the 1970s computing. However, it’s hard to know just how much sway those early efforts truly had. Many of the most groundbreaking works of the 1970s appeared on academic computing systems and never saw a commercial release—in fact, those games never made their way into the lives of anyone but a small community of people with access to an early networked computing service called PLATO at a handful of American universities.

The PLATO system, along with standalone mainframe computing platforms like the DEC-10, attracted creative, technically minded types who saw the emergence of computing systems as an opportunity to push gaming pastimes in new directions. In the space of just a few years, PLATO users created early iterations of the dungeon crawler role-playing game, massively multiplayer experiences (including a trade simulation capable of supporting two dozen people on a cross-country network), procedurally generated experiences that predate the roguelike (and in fact predate *Rogue* itself), and more. But because users could only access the PLATO by sharing time at a select number of universities and libraries, most people who designed the games covered in this volume came to their ideas independently or else twigged to them based on secondhand references. There are exceptions, of course—notably *Wizardry* designers Robert Woodhead and Andrew Greenburg, who took direct inspiration from PLATO adventures when building their seminal adventure—but for the most part, PLATO amounted a creative Galapagos where brilliant innovations evolved unseen by the larger world. Game designers eventually reinvented those radical wheels on their own throughout the latter ’70s and ’80s.

It was really the advent of consumer-oriented microcomputers in 1977—the Apple II and Commodore PET—along with the breakout success of the Atari 2600 console that enabled the proper evolution of the foundational concepts of the metroidvania format. And even then, those devices didn’t reach critical mass until 1979 or ’80; around the same time, the staggering success of arcade games like *Space Invaders*, *Pac-Man*, and *Asteroids* helped to establish video games as a whole as something more than just a passing fad for playing increasingly elaborate takes on table tennis.

This is why I chose to begin this chronology with *Zork*. Thanks to its unique history, *Zork* serves as a bridge between the closed systems and room-sized mainframes of the ’70s and the home computing (and gaming) devices that exploded in popularity and reach through the ’80s. *Zork* began its life on a shared-time academic system as a reinvention of 1977’s *Adventure/ADVENT*, itself an expansion of Willy Crowther’s 1976 *Colossal Cave Adventure*, which had begun life as a recreation of a real-world cave system for users to explore and gradually took on a more fanciful air. Like *Zork*, *Adventure* received commercial releases, though it never quite caught on to the same degree as Infocom’s creation (which received half a dozen sequels over the space of nearly two decades). In fact, *Adventure* faded largely into the mists of time within the larger gaming community until the 2010 documentary *Get Lamp*, which foregrounded it and probably had a great deal to do with the fact that the collective challenge of solving *Adventure* became a key plot point in AMC’s cult 2014 premium cable drama *Halt and Catch Fire*. All of this is to say that *Zork*’s comparative reach and influence, along with its deliberately structured quest and objectives, make it a compelling embarkation point for the metroidvania genre. Even if it’s not a first in any technical sense of the word, its success made it a breakout moment for key concepts like mapping and navigating a persistent world.

(For those interested in learning more about the embryonic years of the PLATO system, I highly recommend *The Friendly Orange Glow: The Untold Story of the PLATO System and the Dawn of Cyberculture* by Deckle Edge.) **M**



NOTABLE FOR: BRINGING A VISUAL COMPONENT TO THE ADVENTURE GENRE



MYSTERY HOUSE

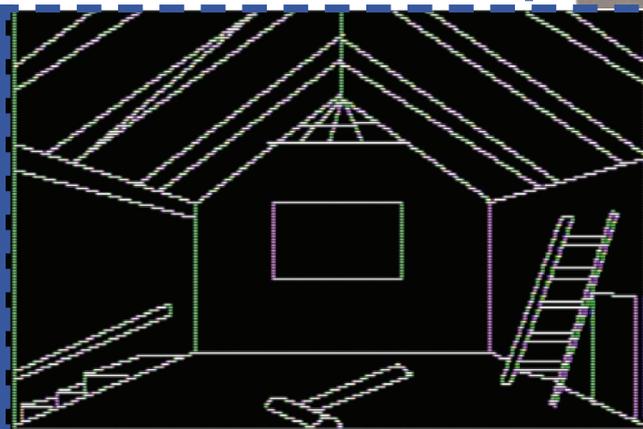
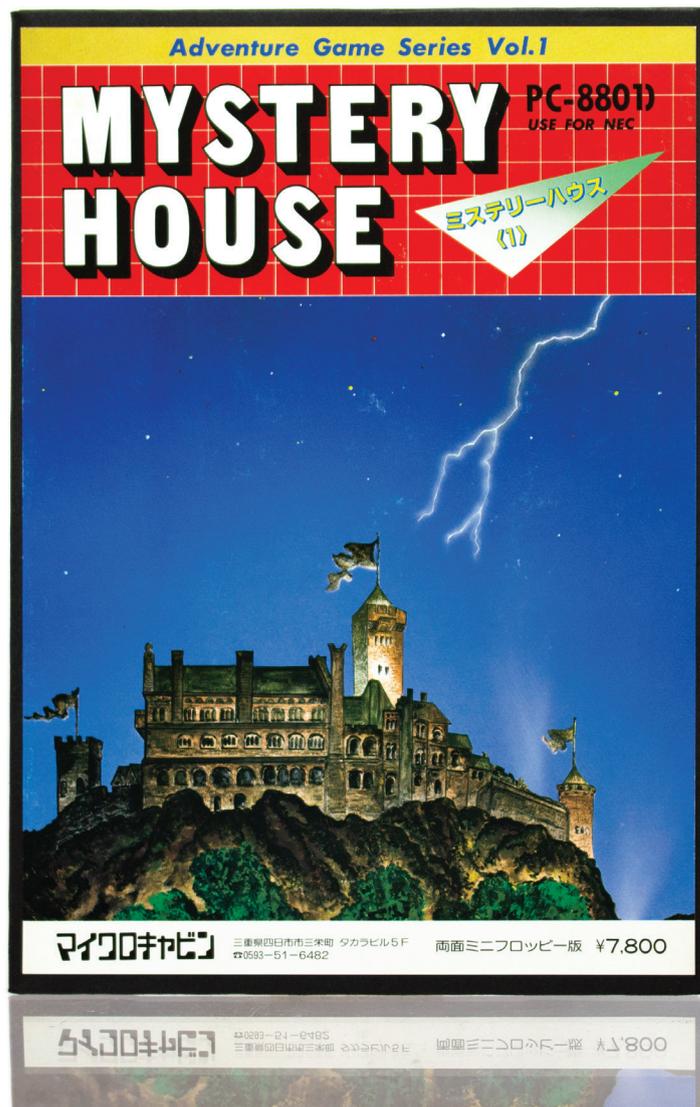
PLATFORM: APPLE II / VARIOUS
DEV: SIERRA ON-LINE | PUB: SIERRA ON-LINE
INITIAL RELEASE: MAY 1980

MYSTERIOUS VISIONS

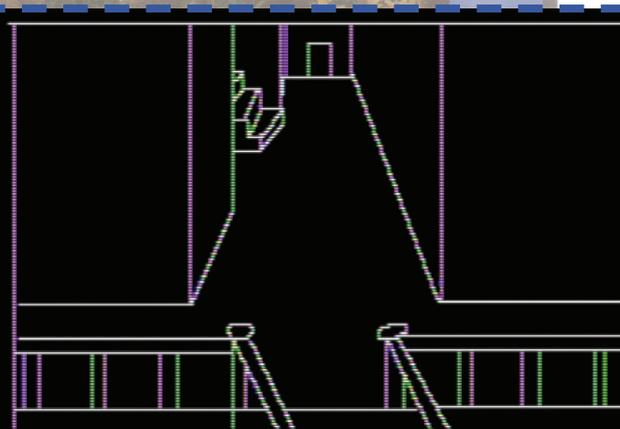
With *Mystery House*, Sierra On-Line struck a midpoint between *Zork* and *Adventure: A parser-based text adventure* that incorporated graphical elements. In terms of gameplay, it skews decidedly in *Zork*'s direction—naturally, given its emphasis on text, an element completely lacking in the Atari 2600 game. *Mystery House* upholds the workings of the narrative adventure, requiring players to navigate its world through terse bursts of simple text and providing them feedback in kind.

However, it's difficult to overstate just how radically the simple addition of graphics changes the overall feel of the experience. *Mystery House* did not exactly set a new standard for computer graphics, even by the standards of 1980; its designer, Roberta Williams, built the game world with stark white outlines against a black background. Not even fluid, natural outlines at that; *Mystery House* depicts its environments with segments of straight lines, even when rendering organic objects like trees, with a sort of naïve quality that treats basic artistic principles (like a common vanishing point) almost like alien concepts.

Nevertheless, it does the trick. *Mystery House*'s combination of simple visuals and a story set almost entirely with a single self-contained locale (the mysterious house of the title) makes for a much less daunting style of adventure than the likes of *Zork* and *ADVENT*. Rather than delineating its world through prose, *Mystery House* provides a visual component alongside its descriptive text, giving players a clear sense of the creators' intent. Of course, this leaves less of the world open to the player's imagination to sketch out—but given the complexity inherent to certain sections of *Zork* and how much that ambiguity could bring the adventure to a temporary halt as players struggled to grasp the geography of the spaces in play, the additional helping hand is hardly a negative here. It's one thing to be told that you've entered a room with a variety of topological features, but actually seeing those details rendered on-screen—however crudely!—makes the entire process of casing the joint and tracking your movements far more manageable. *M*



----- ENTER COMMAND?UP
 IT IS GETTING DARK
 YOU ARE IN THE ATTIC
 ----- ENTER COMMAND?=>



YOU ARE AT THE JUNCTION OF AN EAST/WEST
 HALLWAY AND A NORTH/SOUTH HALLWAY
 ----- ENTER COMMAND?=>

METROIDVANIA TIMELINE

1981

Space Invaders for Atari 2600. Pac-Man fever. The breakout popularity of Game & Watch. *Missile Command*'s addictive (albeit grim) distillation of Cold War nuclear anxiety! Video games captured the zeitgeist of 1980 and wove themselves inextricably into popular culture. What could have been another short-lived 1970s fad like Pet Rocks and geodesic domes became a fixture as gaming fanatics of all ages, genders, and races flocked to arcades, harnessed their home computers for purposes more entertaining than filing recipes, and bought millions of devices purpose-built for allowing them to play games on their televisions.

As the new decade began and a new American president took office amidst promises to wipe away the doldrums of the '70s, video games and computers exploded into popularity. New, budget-conscious computing platforms shipped in the U.S. and Europe, bringing that fabled technology affordable for the average household—and, with it, the ability to take advantage of this incoming tsunami of games. Admittedly, platforms like Commodore's VIC-20 and the Texas Instruments 99/4A offered rudimentary gaming capabilities compared to the likes of bespoke arcade machines and even systems like the Apple II, where medium-defining works like *Ultima* and *Wizardry* made their debuts this year, but it was hard to argue with the price. At the higher end, IBM launched the "true" personal computer line—a platform targeted at business professionals, but whose popularity and easily reproducible design turned it into the de facto industry standard by decade's end and became the underpinning for modern Windows-based computers.

Japan—well into its post-war rehabilitation and rapidly growing into one of the most powerful economic forces on the planet—also saw its share of major innovations. The first Japan-centric computing systems debuted in 1981, offering support for higher-resolution graphics than those produced by Western PCs, necessitated by the intricate text glyphs of the Japanese language's three different forms of writing. While lacking in color depth, the dense graphical resolution and impressive audio capabilities of NEC's PC-8801 and its descendants made those systems a lively incubator for video game innovation—not only in terms of design but music as well.

And, of course, the character-driven arcade action trend cemented by Pac-Man continued as well with games like *Donkey Kong*. Working in collaboration with electronics firm Ikegami Tsushinki, Nintendo created a visually opulent and highly varied action game whose story played out across four distinct stages and whose controls and physics defined the platform action format—an essential building block of the metroidvania. Although that genre was still a long way away in 1981, all of the components that make up its DNA were brewing. *M*

TIMELINE OF EVENTS

January

VIC-20

Commodore designed this computer to be friendly to everyday household users in terms of simplicity and price. It paid off: The VIC-20 was the first PC to sell more than a million units.



February

Defender

This blistering space shooter featured high-speed scrolling action that moved so quickly and aggressively that it needed to borrow *Rally-X's* mini-map to keep players oriented.



June

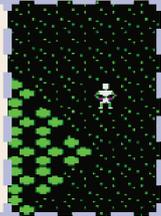
TI-99/4A

The consumer-friendly 99/4A sold at a competitive price but offered expansion options for those who craved more power. Its CPU and graphics chip became industry standards.



Ultima

While hardly the first-ever computer role-playing game, *Ultima* was the first to make any real headway at retail, kicking off a franchise that defined the genre for nearly two decades.



July

Venture

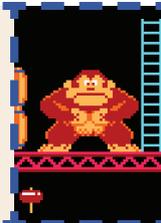
Refining the principles of *Adventure* into a form even better-suited to quick arcade sessions, Exidy's *Venture* turned the dungeon labyrinth into a large space containing smaller rooms.



July, cont.

Donkey Kong

Nintendo's mega-hit perfected run-and-jump play and applied a narrative framework to the action game (climb building, save girl), eventually leading the way to story-driven metroidvanias.



Cassette Vision

Japan's first truly original home console of note, Epoch's machine repurposed the tech of standalone *Pong* clone systems for an affordable, interchangeable, cartridge-based format.



August

IBM Personal Computer

A high-end business machine, IBM's PC was soon cloned by competitors, who turned the format into an industry standard. Its descendants still define home computing decades later.



September

Wizardry

Playing like a *Dungeons & Dragons* treasure quest module in computer form, *Wizardry's* emphasis on exploring (and mapping) a single dungeon defined the workings of virtual game spaces.

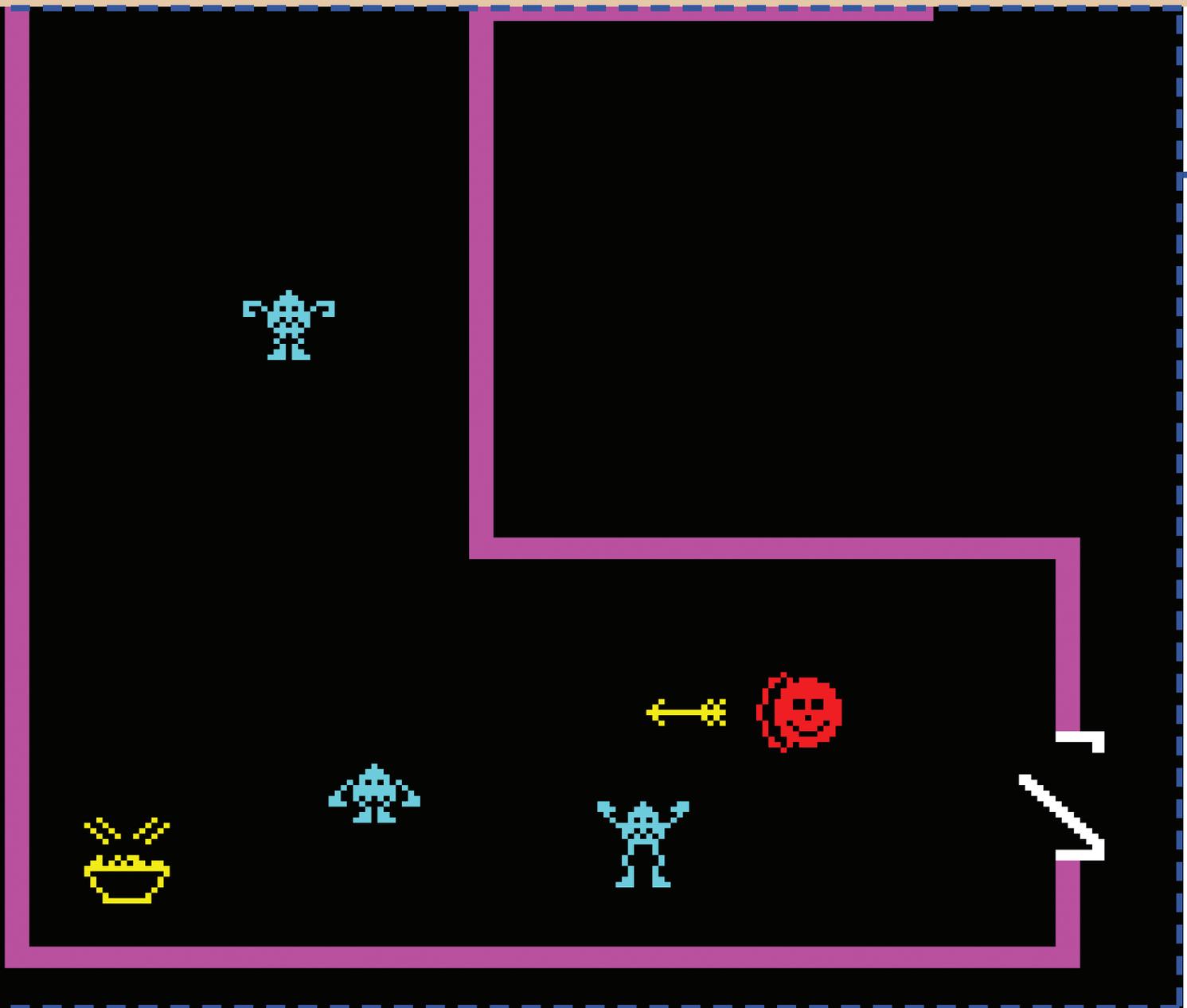


November

PC-8801

A computer designed around the specific needs of the Japanese language, NEC's platform offered incredibly high visual resolution that made it a compelling venue for video gaming.





VENTURE

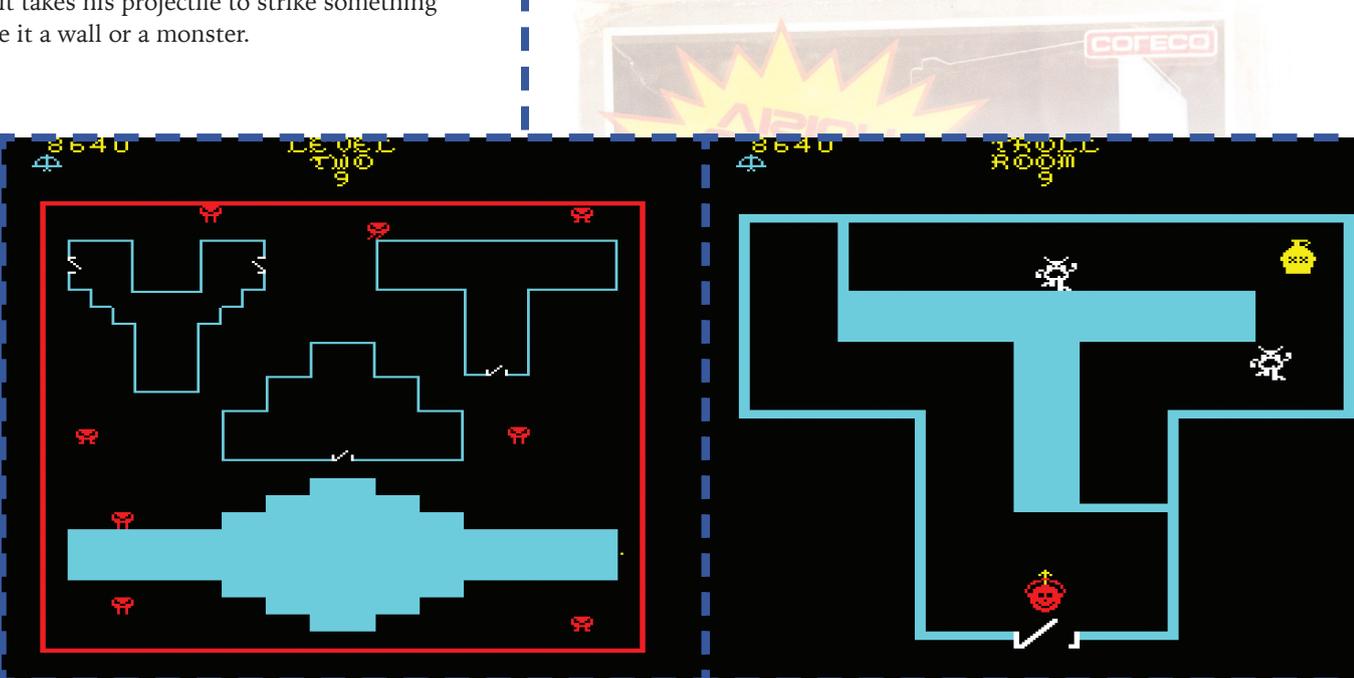
PLATFORM: ARCADE / VARIOUS
DEV: EXIDY | MFG: EXIDY
INITIAL RELEASE: JUNE 1981

A WINKY'S AS GOOD AS A NOD

Because metroidvania games combine both platforming and action/role-playing elements, you can't really gain a proper appreciation of the format without studying the evolution of both genres. So while *Zork* and *Adventure* represent one side of the equation, Exidy's 1981 RPG-inspired arcade title *Venture* deserves mention for helping to define the action side as well. Although *Venture* features none of the platforming that typically forms the backbone of a metroidvania quest, it took an even more dramatic approach to reducing RPG concepts into action form than seen in Atari's *Adventure*.

The game's title leaves no question of its origins and intentions: "Venture" is obviously a truncated form of "Adventure," that hack-and-stab odyssey for the Atari 2600—or perhaps of *Adventure/ADVENT*, aka *Colossal Cave Adventure*, the text game that inspired *Zork*. *Venture*, *ADVENT*, *Adventure*: They're all cut from the same cloth, and they all aspire to achieve the same end. *Venture* simply takes the concept the furthest into a pure action structure suitable to the early '80s arcade environment. It boils down the fundamental concept of role-playing rules into a form tailored for a coin-drop-driven reality.

Protagonist Winky journeys across a dungeon in search of treasure, fighting monsters with a bow and arrow through a string of multi-roomed spaces too simple to be called labyrinths. *Venture*'s platform—an arcade cabinet designed for quick, three-minute play sessions—demanded a simple game design, so there's not really much to the game. Each level consists of a large space populated by four rooms, each containing a different treasure. Winky himself appears as a well-armed smiley face, a friendly version of the deadly Evil Otto from Stern's *Berzerk* or a slightly martial take on Pac-Man. Much like the space fighter in *Galaxian*, Winky can fire only a single arrow at once, with his rate of fire determined not by his reload speed but by how long it takes his projectile to strike something and vanish from play, be it a wall or a monster.



Venture moves a little too slowly to be deemed a shooter, yet its action is too zippy and shallow to qualify as a proper RPG. Of the two, it definitely favors the latter, albeit in a fairly naïve manner. Given its age, *Venture* impresses with the way it almost accidentally stumbles into the duality of overworld/underworld spaces that would become a mainstay of RPGs and adjacent games like *The Legend of Zelda*. Each level (or dungeon) contains exactly four rooms, each of which feature two entrances connecting their inner spaces to the dungeon exterior. While roaming the halls that surround the rooms, you'll encounter a legion of huge skull-like monsters that wander generally (if somewhat randomly) in Winky's direction. Winky can't destroy these beasts, since the exterior spaces appear with a pulled-back point of view in which Winky is reduced to a tiny dot—too small to make out details or fire arrows.

The hall monsters will kill Winky on contact, but you can evade them by ducking into the treasure rooms. When you step into a room, the viewpoint zooms in to a closer perspective, in which Winky scales up to his proper size and gains the power to take out foes. Inside these enclosed spaces, you'll find a treasure to acquire protected by a handful of monsters that lurk nearby. You can shoot the monsters, which collapse when struck by an arrow.

These sequences feel remarkably reminiscent—or rather, prescient—of *The Legend of Zelda*. Not only does the zoomed-in view bear a striking similarity to Nintendo's groundbreaking NES game, but so do the creatures within. As you fight snakes, skeletons, and other *Zelda*-esque foes, you can't shake the sensation that this game had a huge influence on Nintendo (perhaps indirectly, through Nihon Falcom's *Xanadu* or Namco's *The Tower of Druaga*). This is especially true in some of the trap rooms, such as the one with the moving walls that can crush Winky, or the one where grabbing the

loot will cause the quartet of tiny, meandering spiders to turn into huge yellow spiders that make a beeline for Winky.

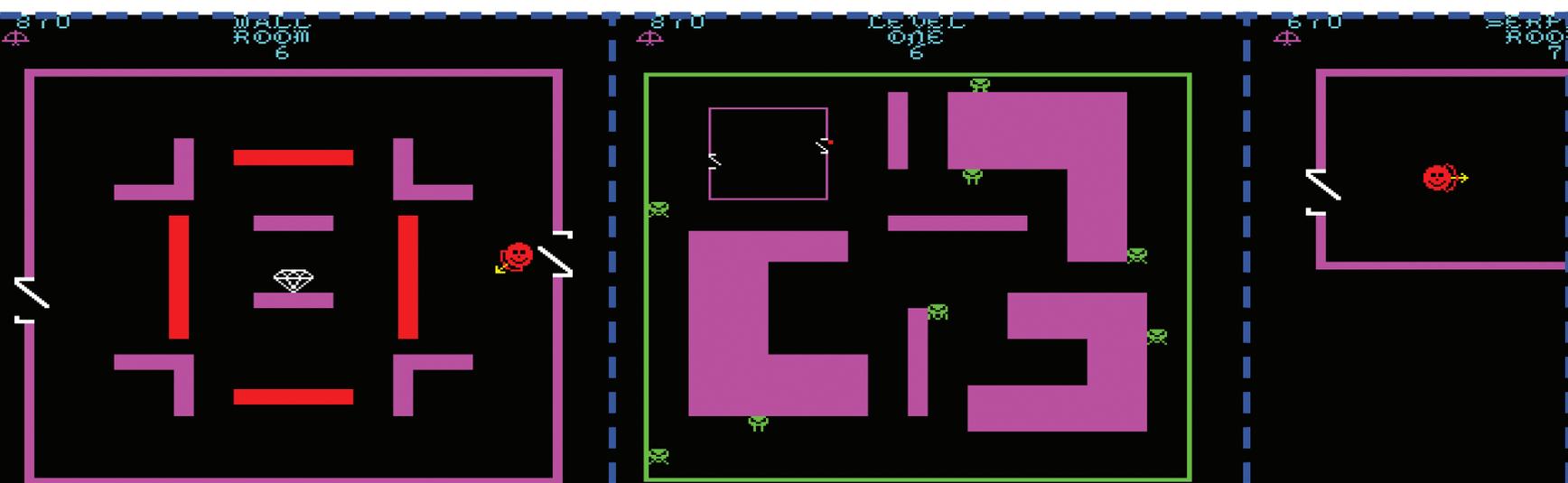
When you capture a room's treasure, a hall monster will burst into the room. In the zoomed-in areas, these creatures look enormous, and they remain invulnerable to arrows—again, reminiscent of *Berzerk*'s Evil Otto. All you can do once confronted by these foes is escape, though you need to proceed with caution. The world outside the treasure rooms maintains a certain element of persistence, which means it can be dangerous to exit a room through the door you originally entered, as you may find the monsters that were chasing you outside be lurking where you left them.

While a bit unfair in its difficulty level, especially in later stages, *Venture* offered a remarkable degree of complexity and sophistication for a 1981 arcade game. Still, it's a very simple game at heart. *Venture* lacks anything like an upgrade path; its treasures exist only to be added to the player's score. The full dungeon consists of just a few stages, each with fixed layouts; once you beat them all, the game loops again at a near-impossible difficulty level. And its graphics look barely a step above ASCII visuals; add some randomness to the layouts and this could just as easily have been a coin-op rendition of procedurally generated classic *Rogue*

rather than a spin on *Adventure*. Nevertheless, with its free-roaming dungeon layouts and RPG trappings, you can see something great taking shape here.

Unfortunately, Exidy never credited *Venture*'s designers, only its composers, so it's impossible to know who actually came up with the game concept. Whoever it was, they did the world a solid by helping to establish some early basics for the action-RPG concept. That feat alone almost makes up for the sheer goofiness of having a protagonist named "Winky." **M**

WHILE A BIT UNFAIR
IN TERMS OF ITS DIFFICULTY LEVEL,
ESPECIALLY IN ITS LATER STAGES,
VENTURE OFFERED A REMARKABLE
DEGREE OF COMPLEXITY AND
SOPHISTICATION FOR A 1981 ARCADE
GAME AND ESTABLISHED SOME
CRUCIAL EARLY ACTION-RPG BASICS.





DONKEY KONG

PLATFORM: ARCADE / VARIOUS
DEV: NINTENDO / Ikegami Tsushinki | MFG: NINTENDO
INITIAL RELEASE: JULY 1981

NOTABLE FOR: EFFECTIVELY INVENTING THE PLATFORM ACTION GENRE

LEAPING INTO THE FUTURE

The metroidvania genre is more or less synonymous with the action RPG, combining the moment-to-moment play mechanics of platform-jumping games with the structure and expectations of a role-playing game. Surprisingly, despite the relative simplicity of run-and-jump platform gaming compared to the children of *Dungeons & Dragons*, the RPG actually entered the picture of video game history many years before the platform genre's first true cornerstone appeared in the form of the 1981 arcade smash, *Donkey Kong*.

Given that half of the word "metroidvania" comes from the *Metroid* series, perhaps it's only fitting that *Metroid* comes from the company that *Donkey Kong* put on the map in the first place—Nintendo. Although *Donkey Kong* may not have been the absolute first game to incorporate platforming mechanics into its design, but it was by far the most fully realized expression of the concept to that point in history. Following in its Mario-sized footsteps, 2D platforming would go on to become more or less the *de facto* basis of action gaming until the advent of proper 3D graphics and game cameras 15 years later. Even so, it wasn't a given that the industry would arrive at that consensus. Just look at games before and immediately after *Donkey Kong*. Rather than accepting a side-view perspective, many action games on 8-bit computers and consoles attempted to emulate a three-dimensional viewpoint by placing the camera in a false overhead perspective. The UK collectively settled on isometric 3D as its go-to point of view, and Sega even created their own answer to *Donkey Kong* in *Congo Bongo*, which transplanted the monkey-chasing action of Nintendo's hit into isometric 3D.

Compared to something like *Adventure* or *Berzerk*, where the forced top-down viewpoint gave players the ability to move freely along two axes, *Donkey Kong's* point of view—in which players could move freely along the ground but could only venture momentarily into vertical space by leaping or climbing ladders—seemed almost unnaturally limiting.

