

FMV Origins: Tom Zito and Digital Pictures

Though full-motion games tend to be sidelined by the medium's historians, they've actually been an instrumental, influential force. According to Tom Zito, the format's key innovator and mastermind behind classics like *Night Trap*, FMV games are the industry's Forrest Gump: Present for some of the most important events in its history.

FMV gaming traces its origins to the early 1980s when Zito (then a journalist for *The New Yorker*) profiled Atari founder Nolan Bushnell, who invited him to join a new venture called Axlon. Zito moved to California to join Bushnell, but his holiday travels soon placed him directly at a crossroads in game history: Nintendo's tentative attempt to restart the U.S. console industry. "I went back to New York over the Thanksgiving break of 1985," says Zito, "and went to a camera store. I saw giant mob of kids—the store was one of the retailers picked for the trial launch of the NES.

"I bought an NES and set it up in the meeting room at Axlon to show to people, and I said, 'Look. If video games are back, who better to get back into the video game business than Nolan?'" Though retailers had been wary of Nintendo's console, Zito and Bushnell immediately recognized that console games were about to return in a big way. They realized Axlon should be at the forefront, but not as an NES licensee.

"Nolan had this idea that if we could figure out a way to put data for video games on VHS cassettes, it would solve the huge manufacturing costs associated with making cartridges," says Zito. "He wanted a game system that was very similar to every other system, except it would store its data on tape." While this idea wasn't outlandish—a more powerful take on the audio cassette drives commonly found in the era's home computers—Zito envisioned a different approach. "If we were going to use a VCR, it should be filmed images, not bitmap graphics," he says. "That would set us apart from everything else that was out there."

Bushnell hated the idea, but toy giant Hasbro loved it. They greenlit a VHS-based game system code-named NEMO and asked Zito to head it up. "I left Nolan's company to start Hasbro Electronics and develop this game system," says Zito. "That was how the NEMO system came to be, and how I wound up being in this world of full-motion video games... even though we didn't really know what full-motion video games were."

Zito's team had to invent the genre; adventure *Night Trap* and shooter *Sewer Shark* led the way. Unfortunately, NEMO never actually made it to market. As its launch loomed, Hasbro shied away from the long odds involved. Zito acknowledges the stakes: "It was truly a bet-the-company proposition," he says. Still, it wasn't the end of the road for those pioneering creations. "Everything got locked up," he says, "and I bought the rights to those two games, just because we'd done so much work on them."

Several years later, Zito's sentimental impulse paid off when Nintendo and Sony began work on what would have been one of the biggest collaborations in video game history. "Around 1990, Sony wanted to acquire *Sewer Shark*, because they were working with Nintendo on this new product called the 'Play Station'. They wanted games that were like movies and wanted to put *Sewer Shark* in the box with this product; could I put together a group of people to convert that title into a pack-in?"

Zito was more than happy to oblige and began working closely with the Sony product development team to convert *Sewer Shark* from VHS to CD-ROM. Not everyone was thrilled with the feedback Zito offered, however. "My colleagues and I really rubbed [PlayStation lead engineer] Ken Kutaragi the wrong way," he says. "He didn't like that we were fundamentally telling Sony how they ought to design a product."

Any friction between Zito and Kutaragi turned out to be less of a deal-breaker than the friction that developed between Nintendo and Sony. Nintendo backed out of the partnership, leaving Sony to lick its wounds and settle for being merely a software company (at least for a little while). Zito and his newly minted company Digital Pictures suddenly went from working with Nintendo to working with their rival, Sega.

"Sony had sunk quite a bit of money into helping us get *Sewer Shark* on disc, and they'd become aware of the Sega CD," Zito recalls. "I said, 'Not only can we make product for you, but we have a title we could make pretty quickly: *Night Trap*.'"

Digital Pictures became one of Sega's key partners for the remainder of the 16-bit generation, publishing nearly 20 FMV-based games for Sega CD and 32X. As a new generation emerged, however, real-time polygons quickly replaced FMV for telling in-game stories. FMV faded and has largely been forgotten.

In hindsight, Digital Pictures' work through the '90s is clearly a creatively and socially important part of the medium's history. Zito acknowledges the great curation work that partners like Tyler Hogle and William Mesa have done in bringing games like *Corpse Killer* and *Night Trap* to modern platforms—a process that has proven to be surprisingly difficult. "It's been frustrating for Tyler to fundamentally have to reinvent the wheel in order to make the games work," says Zito.

He also says the inconsistent digital archiving standards of gaming's early years can be an issue: "There were pieces of footage for *Sewer Shark* that somehow had gotten lost. I spent a lot of time with Tyler and with Bill trying to figure out some way we could recreate those parts from other pieces of the game that were still intact."

For the most part, Zito has taken a hands-off approach to the restoration of the Digital Pictures catalog, as it's largely technical work best left to programmers. But he admits that it can be difficult returning to a body of work that caused so much unwarranted controversy; *Night Trap* famously became a proxy in '90s political battles. Both sides treated Zito like a punching bag.

"To be candid with you, this is also a very painful part of my life," he admits. "From the outside, it looks like, 'You innovated all this stuff. Isn't that exciting?' Pioneers are guys who get a lot of arrows in their asses. I remember the arrows a lot more than all the stuff we accomplished."

Still, Zito is able to take some solace in the fact that his work does remain genuinely beloved by fans, and that software that faced such turbulence before it ever became a reality has proved so enduring. "I'm surprised that so many people still feel really strongly one way or the other about these titles," he says. "That's always one of the amazing things about being an entrepreneur or creator, when you see how people react to what you've done: That these games have such a big impact on some people."

"What doesn't surprise me is that people who grew up on these things would want to have something that was emotionally meaningful to them now be a focus of collecting. The notion that people could be spending six or seven figures to buy really rare NES games, instead of investing their money into baseball cards or art—that doesn't surprise me in the least." LR

'Wales' of a Tale: Modernizing the FMV Genre

The term "FMV game" may suggest old, grainy, "B-movie" material, but Wales Interactive has found success by pushing back against that image. The studio's innovative video adventures have won awards on modern consoles by striving to match contemporary film standards. According to co-founder David Banner MBE, Wales Interactive shies away from the term FMV.

"Even if FMV was entertaining," says Banner, "it seemed to be camp and tongue-in-cheek. When we first started making these, we fought that war—people thought it was going to be exactly the way it was before."

Still, Banner says there's much to be admired about vintage FMV adventures, made by "people who wanted to make cinema and would experiment on a budget." That spirit, he feels, lives on in his games. "We try to up the quality of the writing, production values, and acting. For instance, *The Complex* was written by an Emmy-winning *The Handmaid's Tale* writer, Lynn Renee Maxcy. It's an indie project, but the ambition is much higher."

It's taken Wales Interactive years

to reach this point, and Banner acknowledges the studio has learned hard lessons along the way and scrambled to adapt. "We needed to teach some of the writers we work with not how to tell stories, but how to tell non-linear stories," he says. "And how to plan them. *The Bunker* was planned



on paper! It was all just wads and wads of A4 paper. So we started making a tool that, before filming begins, creates a script that you can play through."

It helps that Wales itself has emerged as a hot spot of film and TV production, with the likes of *Doctor Who* and *His Dark Materials* filmed in Cardiff. "It would be stupid for us not to use what's in

our locality!" Banner says.

Another advantage: The studio has become adept at balancing its roster of games, with small-scale creations like *The Infectious Madness of Doctor Dekker*—essentially an FMV-based visual novel—propping up more ambitious works like *The Bunker* (which plays like a classic LucasArts adventure) or *Late Shift* (a glossy interactive heist movie).

Banner aims to bring something new to the Netflix era of media consumption. "We're a happy medium of being able to binge but equally being able to engage," he says. "You get to change the story as it happens, then enjoy watching it again the next day with a friend—they'll make different choices and you'll see a different outcome and different scenes you didn't."

In other words, he says, FMV games movies have potential to transcend both games and film, and Wales Interactive leads the charge in defining this new artform. "We think interactive films have a chance of becoming mainstream and not looked on as 'just' games," Banner says. LR

Killer is a huge sort of undertaking—we had to recreate almost all the visual effects in the whole game.

"On another one that we've been working on—they knew it was going to be super low-resolution, so they didn't care about rigs and wires, because they knew those wouldn't show up. Once you've gone up to high-definition, though, it looks really bad. We've had to go in on hundreds and hundreds of shots and remove all the rigs and wires out of the game. There were also a lot of [effects] like lightning and low-res explosions that were really sort of poorly done."

In some extreme cases, Flash Film Works has even had to create all-new material to help patch over issues in the original games, as with *Corpse Killer*. "We had to create a new area in which to play the game," he says. "We knew that there were problems with *Corpse Killer* and complaints about the shooting gallery, so we upgraded the gameplay. We changed out a lot of the zombies from what they were originally in the game—they're actually 3D characters now, not live-action characters." LR

Flash Film Works Sets a New Definition for Low-Res Vintage FMV Footage

Founded during the heyday of the FMV boom by Hollywood effects supervisor William Mesa, Flash Film Works has played an essential role in bringing classic FMV creations up to snuff for modern systems. Yet Mesa says he never intended make gaming part of his career. He fell into the role when Digital Pictures told him his knack for effects work made him a perfect fit for elaborate projects like *Double Switch* and *Corpse Killer*.

After more than a decade of working on traditional Hollywood productions, Mesa found FMV gaming an interesting challenge. Shooting an interactive production works differently shooting for the big screen, he says. "You have to spend time understanding the game and how it's going to work. Normally, if we're creating a shot for a feature film, those are usually about nine seconds long. But when we're doing it for these type of things, they're two or three minutes."

Mesa even had the opportunity to direct his own Digital Pictures production, though the FMV boom ended before that game (*Maximum Surge*, starring *Baywatch*'s

Yasmine Bleeth) reached completion. Shelved midway through production, it remains one of the era's most intriguing lost works. Unlike most lost video game productions, though, *Maximum Surge* could see the light of day eventually, because Mesa acquired the rights to it (and several other Digital Pictures creations) when the studio folded—though he admits his ambitions aren't strictly limited to games.

"One of my goals in getting these games was to make a movie out of *Corpse Killer*," he says. "It's a comedic sort of game, and I was visual effects supervisor on a number of Sam Raimi movies, including *Army of Darkness*. I wanted to make *Corpse Killer* in that light. And *Maximum Surge*—I wanted to try making that as a television series."

For now, his work with the Digital Pictures catalog is focused on bringing that old material up to current standards. "The games were created in low resolution so they could play on Sega CD," he explains. "We've had to go back and recreate all of these different files and composite them from original imagery. A game like *Corpse*

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LIMITED RUN

For Physical Media Enthusiasts!

FMV Interactive Movie Blowout!

How Wales Interactive Puts the "Emotion" Into "Full Motion Video"

Screaming Villains Speaks Calmly About Their Heroic Preservation Work

Journey Back to the Beginning with *Dragon's Lair*

Plus: Tom Zito on the Dawn of FMV Games



Profiles in Limited Greatness: Caroline Liddick

What's your role at Limited Run?

I'm Director of Communications... or Lord of the Tweets, whichever you prefer.

How did you get your start here?

I actually came over sight-unseen from California, where I had been working at Telltale when it closed. Josh had tweeted about an open position that sounded up my alley and I was familiar with LRG through a friend who had bought *Night Trap*. A few weeks after I reached out to Josh, I had moved across the country and started working here!

Any non-gaming hobbies?

Like many people my age who sit at a computer all day, I am really into baking. American-style sweets are my wheelhouse—I make lots of cakes and cookies to share with the office. I encourage ev-

eryone to bake their own treats!! (FYI, my favorite introductory recipe is Milk Bar's compost cookie. It's super easy and available on their website. Give it a shot!) I'm currently trying to crack the savory side of baking with more bread loaves, and yes... that means a sourdough starter is in my future. But I want to make a good bagel first, so that's the current short term goal!

What's your all-time favorite game?

This question is so hard and I feel like my answer changes daily with my mood... but *Paper Mario: The Thousand-Year Door*, probably. I was a GameCube kid for sure!

What's your dream Limited Run release?

I'm going to cheat and say either a *Sly Cooper* or *Humongous Entertainment* collection. I can't pick between them!

Prez Says: Fully in Motion

Anyone who was alive in the '90s should remember the multimedia revolution, when CD-ROM drives became commonplace. Once my family finally got a Packard-Bell capable of running some decent games, *Mega Race* quickly became a favorite of mine. I was fascinated with the possibilities of how full-motion video could integrate with gaming.

In 1995, I finally got to play Sega CD, and the first game I tried was *Night Trap*. I was blown away. It was a movie I could control the outcome of! From there, I played *The 7th Guest* and whatever FMV

games my rich friend had for his 3DO. I couldn't get enough! By the time I actually had equipment that could play these games, the genre had faded into obscurity. I forgot about it as quickly as I had fallen in love with it.

Flash-forward nearly 20 years and I've found myself in the middle of the genre's renaissance. It's been incredible to help re-release *Night Trap*, *Double Switch*, and many other great FMV games. I know my younger self would be impressed.

As always, thank you for your support. And don't forget: Physical is forever! LR

How the Sausage is Remade: Screaming Villains

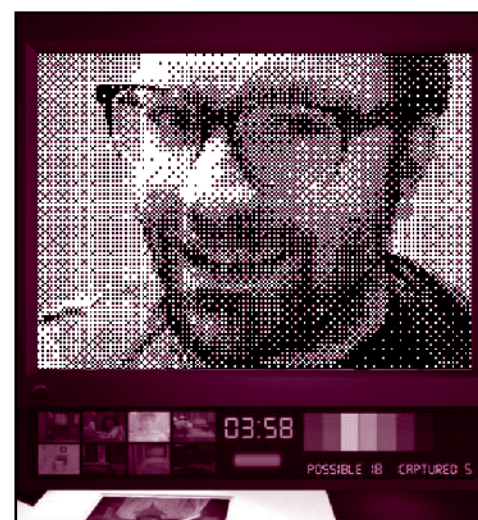
As a kid drawing fan art of *Mortal Kombat*, Tyler Hogle longed for a career in video games. Little did he realize that the Sega CD FMV games a friend introduced him to after Christmas one year would be what got him there.

"It was usually the rich kid in school that had a Sega CD," Hogle says. "I just happened to be best friends with him." Titles like *Night Trap* and *Double Switch* drew him in with intriguing covers and Hollywood stars. They stuck with him. Years later, as an adult with time to kill, Hogle idly converted a few to iOS, ripping FMV files from the original CDs and rebuilding the games around them.

"We were trying to troll gaming websites," Hogle says. "It got back to [Digital Pictures founder] Tom Zito, and he called me the next day." An idle joke soon blossomed into full-time work for

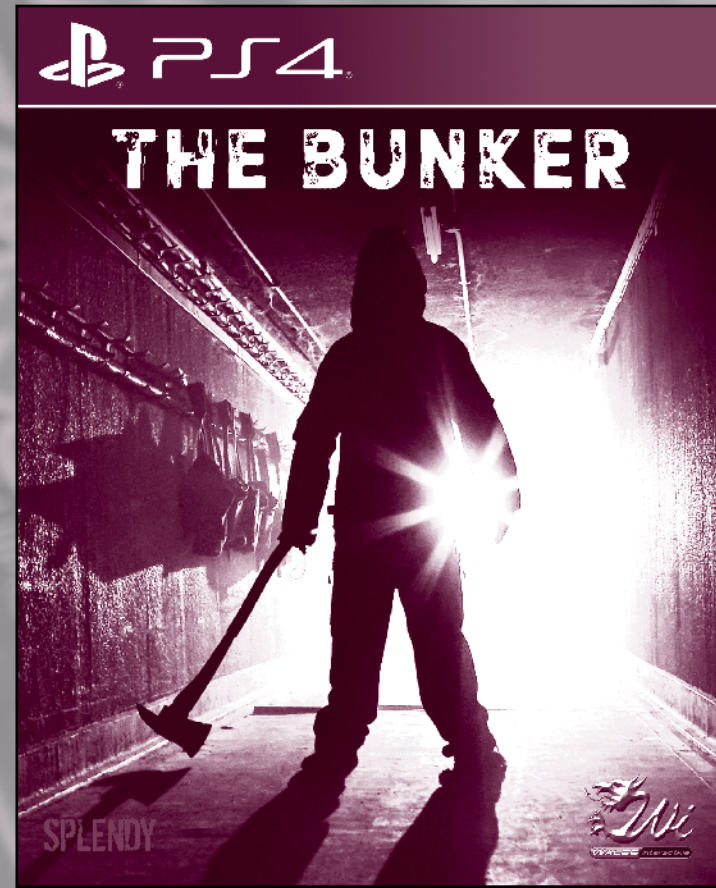
Hogle, the one-man team behind remastering house Screaming Villains: "I recreate each game from scratch and try to make it as close to the original as possible," he says. "I wouldn't say these projects aren't difficult, but they don't take long to make. All the hard work—filming the footage—is already done."

Tyler says he sees himself as an archivist. "I treat games like a special edition Blu-ray release. I'm big on the historic aspect of it. We get documentaries on movies, so why not on FMV games?" At the same time, rather than simply republishing them as-is, Hogle also adds subtle tweaks and improvements, whether that means rebalancing the scoring system in *Night Trap* or revamping the combat mechanics in *Corpse Killer*. He's not simply bringing back the classics; he's celebrating and improving them. LR

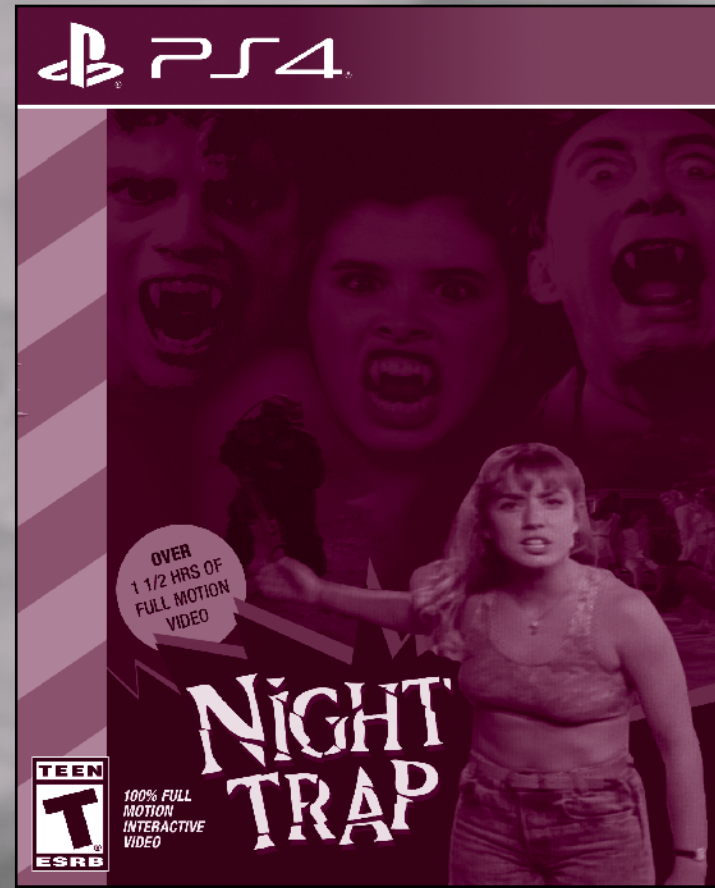


FMV (full-motion video) is a blast from gaming's past: A technology from the days when computers could barely render enough polygons to make human figures look like LEGO figurines. Back then, the most convincing way to bring human emotion and nuance into virtual spaces was to film actual humans and insert that footage into the game. The tech got its start with LaserDisc games like *Dragon's Lair* in the early 1980s and properly took off in the '90s once CD-ROM tech became widely available. A few years later, it all but vanished as gamers and developers decided that polygonal actors were finally good enough to use instead. But FMV games never really went away. In fact, they've made a comeback in recent years! This issue of *Club O' Fun News* celebrates our lineup of classic and modern-day FMV games with insights from the people responsible for making them happen—both then and now!
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The Limited Run Games FMV Lineup! Collect Them All! More to Come!



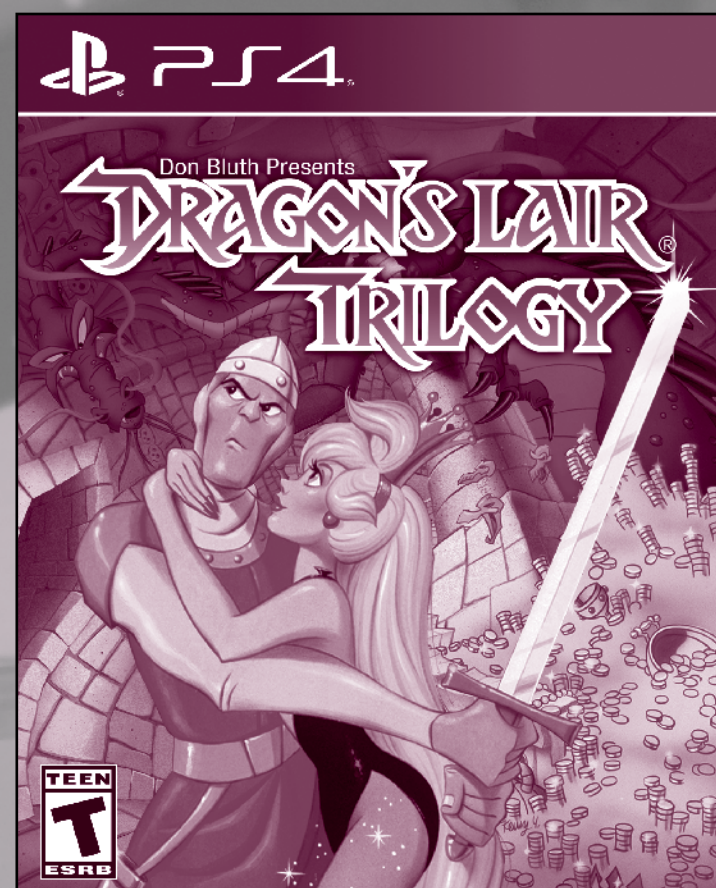
The Bunker
PlayStation 4 (#067)



Night Trap
PlayStation 4 (#074) | Vita (#193) | Switch (#008) | PC



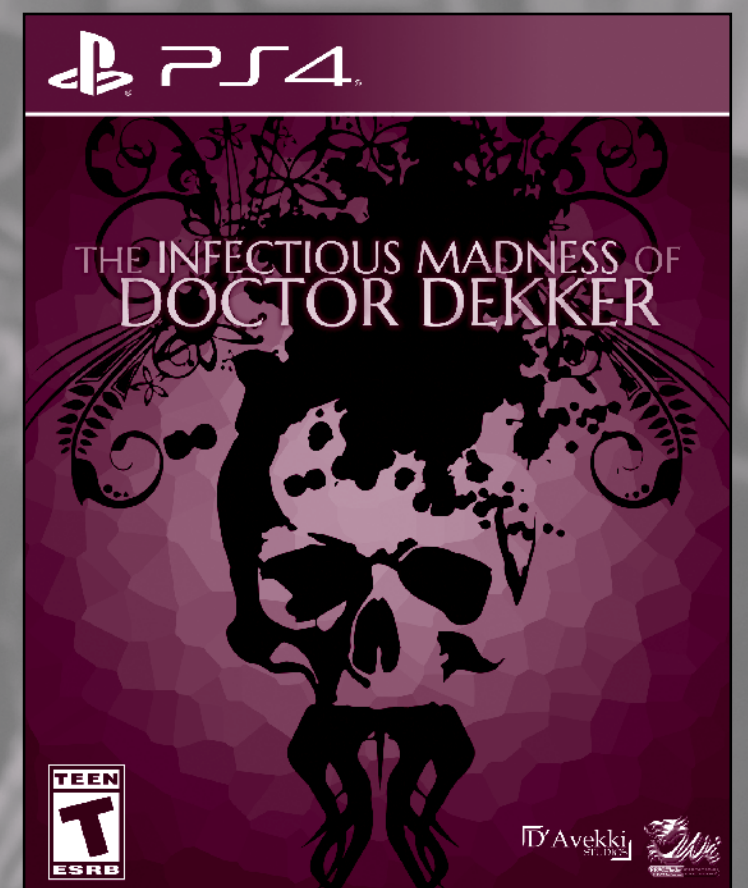
Late Shift
PlayStation 4 (#178)



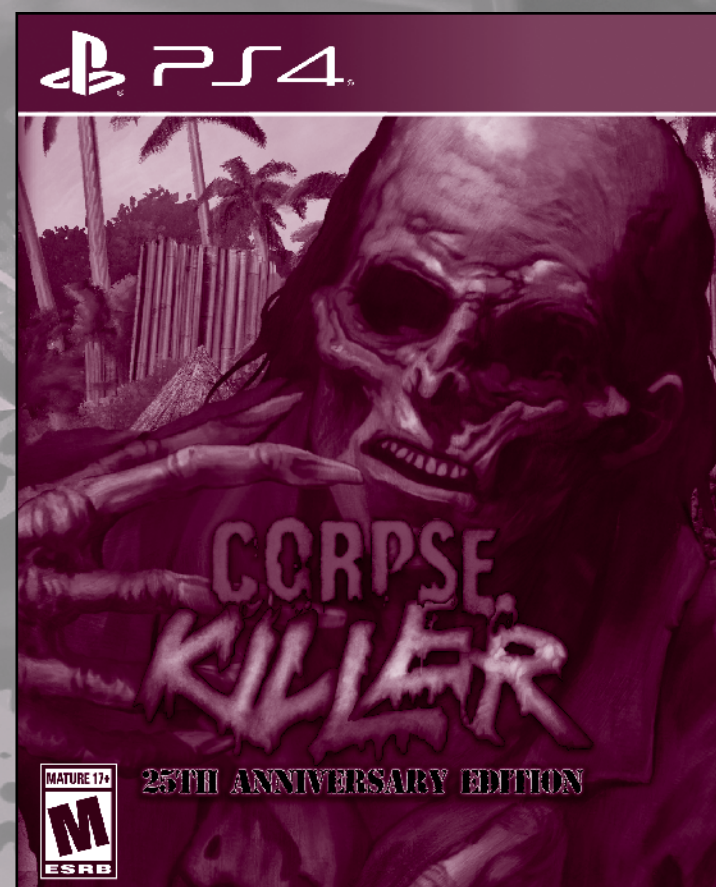
Dragon's Lair Trilogy
PlayStation 4 (#183) | Switch (#036)



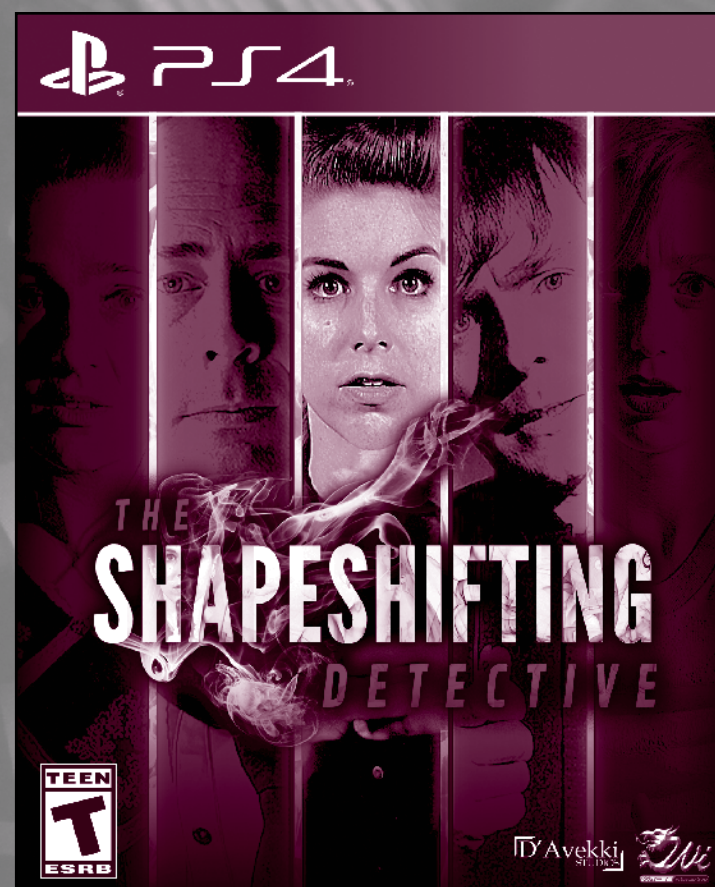
Double Switch: 25th Anniversary Edition
PlayStation 4 (#194) | Switch (#041) | PC



The Infectious Madness of Doctor Dekker
PlayStation 4 (#266)



Corpse Killer: 25th Anniversary Edition
PlayStation 4 (#279)

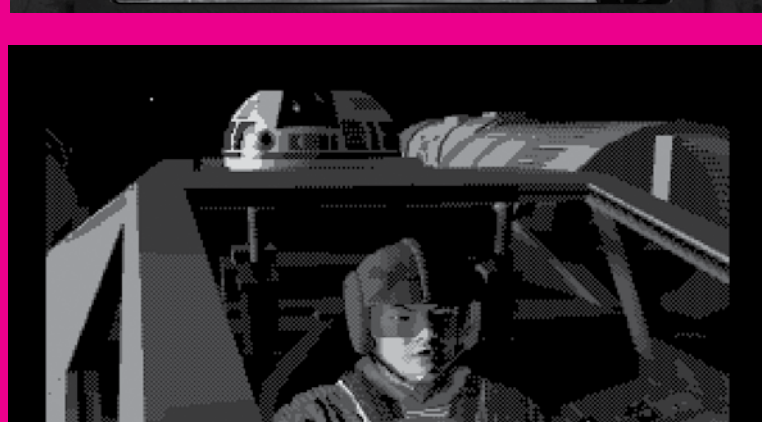
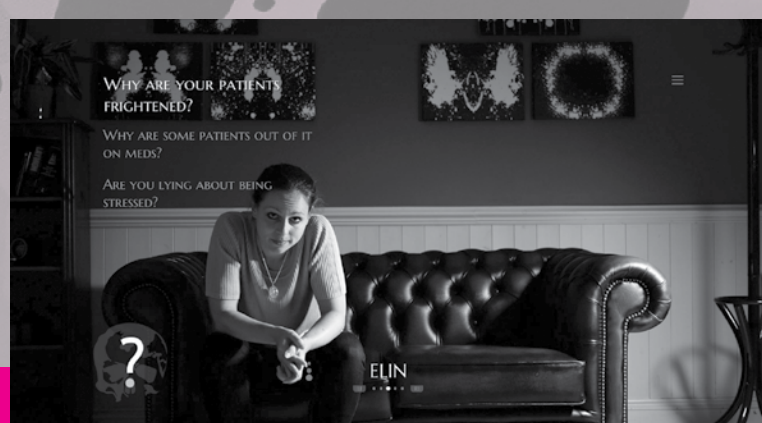


The Shapeshifting Detective
PlayStation 4 (#301)



Star Wars: Rebel Assault
Sega CD

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Full-Motion Rumors

As always, the Limited Run newsletter isn't just here to entertain! It's also here to *intrigue*. That's the entire purpose of this column. These 100% true rumors were sustainably grass-fed before being ethically slaughtered to be served to you on a silver (well, magenta) platter. Please enjoy, and remember: Whatever news you think these rumors hint at is definitely correct, probably.

- There are so many letters in "FMV"! F! M! V! And... D?! Hmm.
- Limited Run has published a few newly created games for the Nintendo Entertainment System, and a couple of classic NES games as well. But it sounds like our customers may be jammin' to some modern-day releases made for the console's Japanese counterpart, the Famicom, in the near future. Stay "tune"d!
- Miss out on an issue of the *Club O' Fun News*? Shipping hiccups due to the worldwide COVID-19 shutdown scrambled things, we know. But worry not: If you've missed an issue, you'll be able to catch up this holiday season with an omnibus collection of all 2020 newsletters—and then some! In fancy hardcover form!
- Every Limited Run shipment beginning this fall will come with a sourdough starter! That's right, we're "baking" bad.
- Will there be more Limited Run FMV releases? You betcha, pardner! Y'all may wanna git on over to the local haberdashery and pony up the cash for a 10-gallon hat before our next releases make their way to your collection.
- The *Scott Pilgrim* saga continues! Now it sounds as though a famous developer is in talks to remaster the long sought-after brawler as an FMV adventure featuring footage from the 2010 film. "Cera" it isn't so, Universal Pictures! LR

Dragon's Lair Trilogy: Revisiting FMV's Primal Form

Dragon's Lair! The game that started the FMV genre before the term "FMV" even existed. Boasting the considerable talents of former Disney animator Don Bluth, Dragon's Lair was the centerpiece of every arcade in the early '80s: A literal interactive cartoon. It spooled gorgeous, hand-drawn animation clips from LaserDisc, slightly randomized and overlaid with digital markers to instruct players which buttons to press to keep heroic Dirk the Daring from dying one of dozens of hilarious ways.

For years, playing Dragon's Lair at home meant dealing with the grainy, downsampled Sega CD version—or worse, dealing with some alternate take that bore no resemblance to the arcade original. That changed in 1999, when Digital Leisure acquired the game and began republishing it not only on home consoles but also on more primitive devices, like DVD players.

Digital Leisure general manager Paul Gold says he's driven to keep Dragon's Lair in circulation, as befits its legacy. "We joke internally that we're the 'keepers of the Lair,'" he says. "People email and say, 'When are you releasing on [platform]?' Not wanting to

disappoint fans, we release it. Dragon's Lair has been on almost every home console since 1984. Why stop now?"

Unlike many game preservation projects, keeping Dragon's Lair relevant involves more than just slapping it into an emulator. The process amounts to proper film restoration. "The original video for the games were transfers from the [standard definition] LaserDiscs," says Gold. "We knew we'd need to go back to the original film negative to produce an HD master. So we reached out directly to creators Don Bluth and Gary Goldman to let us create fresh transfers. When we saw the first images, we were floored—they were so rich and clean compared to the washed-out LaserDisc! Even the retransferred audio revealed things barely heard in the LaserDisc versions."

And while the actual gameplay of Dragon's Lair (and its sequels Space Ace and Dragon's Lair II: Time Warp) amounts to simple Simon Says button-pressing, the shift to modern technology demands careful attention due to differing system speeds and frame rates. "We try to ensure the game is as arcade-accurate as possible," Gold says, "right

down to the exact frame numbers things are supposed to operate at."

As steward of a piece of gaming history, Gold takes his role seriously, and he values feedback from fans when minor inconsistencies creep into a release. "Fans will call me directly and say, 'I can't believe you messed up the video jump in the Underground Rivers scene. You know that jump isn't supposed to cut off that many frames!' And then I'll actually load it up, look at it and... well...yeah, they are right."

Gold says he's especially mindful of the fact that he isn't just preserving a game—he's maintaining both an art form and memories. "We tend to place video games outside of traditional arts and entertainment experiences," he says. "Somehow, video games haven't shared that same place, but I believe that's beginning to change. When you speak with fans of the series, they can pinpoint exactly what their emotions were the first time they played. To be able to load up a game of your youth and maybe share that story and emotion with your own child, spouse, friend—whomever—that is worth preserving." LR