

Lord of the Dungeon: A Fourth-Year+ Review! (by Aswald)

Graphics: 6

Sound: 4

Gameplay: 9

Overall: 10

A second review for the same game, only four years later?

In this case, yes. As this 1983 game for the ColecoVision by NAP was the first battery-backed RPG (or any) game for the pre-NES consoles, one might wonder how it would hold up. Was it just a technical marvel? Would it stand the test of time?

The answer is...yes.

Since both the original reviews and the instructions (by yours truly) are available right here at the Digital Press, I won't go back over all that in detail. Instead, I'll simply go over what is right with this game, and what its weak points are.

This game is essentially a simplified version of Wizardry. Like that game, you pick a character race, and, after his or her attributes have been randomly selected - one's gender and race affect these attributes - decide which profession, which must be allowed based on the overall attributes, you want the character to be. Like Wizardry, there is gold to purchase things, a party of up to six characters, and a 10-level maze-like dungeon to explore. You encounter and fight monsters, and there are traps and secret doors.

However, unlike Wizardry, there are no locked doors. The only treasures, which can include magic items, are found with monsters, which are ALWAYS hostile. These chests are never locked or booby-trapped. The only traps are pits and teleportation rooms, which are always in the same places, and always do the same things. There are no character alignments. The items you can purchase are normal basic weapons, shields, and armor.

And, here it is right here, outright: there is no equivalent of "Werdna." There is no "final purpose" here. At least, in the usual sense...

Now, first, what is right with the game, which is more than 80% of it:

First and foremost, of course, is the fact that this game is battery-backed. It is therefore the ONLY pre-NES adventure game that can be played over the course of months. This game eliminated one of the biggest and most important advantages computers had over their gaming cousins. Had it been released in 1983, well, then...

As with most such games from that era, there are two kinds of spells for spell-casters: Magic and Cleric. This part of the game is done extremely well, with a wide variety of both, and the two different kinds of spells are satisfyingly different, each with advantages and disadvantages. Cleric spells are the healing spells, the anti-poison spells, the ones that can resurrect, and even allow the caster to escape back to the

surface. Actual offensive spells are weaker than Magic spells, except where the undead are concerned, and they cannot ever harm the caster or the party.

Magic spells, overall, are the better offensive spells, but most of them can partially backfire, so one must be careful about their use. These can summon monsters to aid the party, protect against fire-based spells, strengthen fighting abilities, improve armor, and, at the highest level (sixth), allow a devastating spell that does not harm the party.

And there are certain spells that do similar things. Both Magic and Cleric spells include those that can control monsters, for example. But while the Magic allows but one while Cleric allows up to four, the Clerical version is only temporary, while the Magical version is permanent. There are also spells from both sets that send a destructive bolt against one enemy.

The spell system is unique. Some games have "mana," which is simply power points, and using magic spells depletes this, how much depending upon the spell. AD&D games require you to select your spells in advance, level by level.

Lord of the Dungeon, however, is in between here. You are only allowed a certain number of spells per level, but you can cast whichever spells you want for that level, as you want to. The only limitation is the number allowed per level, not type. Thus, you do not have quite as much freedom as in the mana-based systems, but a good deal more than in AD&D's system.

There are also at least 140 magical items. What a character can or cannot use depends upon his class. Some lesser items can be used by all, so even a simple fighter can cast a healing spell...but these items are encountered randomly, after a successful combat.

So, overall, this game has the magic part down solid.

There is a tremendous variety in what you can be. There are 11 character classes, and 8 character races, with male and female, so there are 168 possible character types (Courtesans can only be female).

One unique, and excellent, aspect of this game is the "Peasant" class. Since certain races can never be certain classes from the outset, becoming a Peasant allows you to earn better attributes until you can become whichever character you want to be. This is how I create an "Ogre Phage." You can, of course, choose not to do this (a-la AD&D).

The classes are nicely varied. There are fighters, magic-users, clerics...each with advantages and disadvantages. There are classes which are actually combinations: "Phage" is a fighter/magic-user, for example. "Courtesan" is a class for females only, with the unique ability of "seduce." I've never encountered this peculiar class anywhere else.

You can name your party. You can name your character.

Monsters is another strong point in this game, since it boasts more than 140 different monsters. There are a number of different types, and they can simply fight, they can poison (more than one sort), drain levels, hypnotize, use as many different kinds of spells as you are allowed to, attack in 3 different groups of 15 each, and some are even not vulnerable to certain specific spells (though not enough, here). So, overall, this is one of this game's strongest points.

An interesting, and unique option, is the "secret room" option. This is really just a randomly-chosen place in each dungeon level which can contain monsters from much deeper down. While it is always possible (1 in 36) to run into monsters from 1 or even 2 levels deeper, this particular option means that, at regular intervals, there will ALWAYS be such an encounter...somewhere, in a level. There will always be a magic item to win, too, although you never know what.

This is important, because Mr. Battenberg, the programmer, clearly programmed in a set of monsters that you would encounter in "levels 11 and 12," if such levels had existed. Thus, when you are down in level 9, or especially level 10, there are some of the most deadly monsters of all possibly - just possibly - lurking somewhere. The worst I ever encountered were the dreaded Titans, which annihilated my high-level party in one round...before I could even fight...and I'm still not quite sure what they did. So, in effect, a "final purpose" might be to find and defeat ALL monsters- and this could take quite some searching...assuming you want to find them!

You can actually create 12 characters, even though only 6 can be used at any one time. Thus, you can bring back magic items and weapons for the "unused" ones' use, if you wish. You could also use them interchangeably.

As in any such game, you can earn experience levels. But only two at a time, mind you! And different races and classes earn them at different rates!

Except for Elves, characters can grow old and die. They have different lifespans, so how you play is important - resting takes one month. And you MUST rest to gain new levels, and to regain spell ability. And if you are thinking of just being an Elf, well...they take the longest to gain levels, and have relatively few hit points. You can try to become strong enough to journey down to level 10 and find certain monsters - and defeat them? - before growing too old. That would be a "final purpose..."

A really strong point in this game is the ability to try an entirely different kind of party. Normally, I play 2 Monks (Gnolls), a Versatile (Gnoll), a Phage (Ogre), a Ranger (Gnoll), and a Priest (Dwarf). Maybe next time, I'll try a Scout, two Phages, a Mage, a Courtesan, and a Priest. With different races, perhaps?

Now- for the weak points in this game.

As with many such games, even the later ones, fighters are at a distinct disadvantage in the more dangerous levels. This is because, unlike the spell-casters, they do not really improve as they gain levels, beyond hit points. Sure, they do gain some extra strength and such; they do have better saving throws...but so do the spell-casters.

In the old AD&D game, one way in which fighters improve is the ability to strike more often per round as they gain in levels. This is obviously VERY significant: if you start with the ability to strike only twice in the early stages, but eventually gain the ability to strike, say, five times later on, then the advantages are obvious, especially against more powerful opponents. Combine this with the ability to do extra damage, and fighters are formidable, indeed.

But while you do gain some extra ability to do more damage in this game, you are always limited to a maximum of just two hits per round...period. First level Hirebrand or 70th, it doesn't matter- just two.

This is a serious weakness because in the lower dungeon levels, you can and will encounter groups of very dangerous monsters. Red Dragons have over 100 hit points each, and can do horrible amounts of damage - 100 points, for example! - per individual attack! So if you encounter 10 of these monsters, it would take even two Ogre Hirebrands at least a number of rounds to kill them, especially since they cannot do so with one blow each. Long before then, because several Dragons can attack in each round...your fighters will be dead.

Another problem is the fact that fighters can only attack in the first and second positions, unlike spell-casters, who can attack from anywhere. This is because distance weaponry, such as archery equipment, slings, and the like, do not exist in this game.

In fact, there aren't any advantages in the later part of the game to being a fighter. Scouts can scout ahead, increasing your chances of surprising an enemy, and if successful, gain one critical hit in the first round of battle; Ninjas always get one critical hit per round...but Monks always get two such hits, and they too can scout. Plus they can "Dispel" if surprise is successful. Plus they can spell cast. Plus they soon get a much better armor class.

It's not even close.

Even if fighters are usually promoted faster than other classes, that just doesn't matter. Their abilities do not increase nearly enough, and what good are extra hit points if that only means that you will die anyway, but in the next round of battle?

As a result, fighters are, at best, good only for the earliest part of the game.

Another problem is money. Once you've bought your basic equipment, all the many tens of thousands of gold pieces you find are useless.

Certain basic items should have been available for sale. Fighters would have been a much more effective class if they could have purchased healing and anti-poison potions, for example. Archery equipment would've been a strength. Maybe, if your energy levels had been drained, an in-town priest could have been the only way to quickly regain them- for a hefty price, of course. And the level five resurrection spell would be for the party, but the superior level six resurrection spell would have been for that priest. Again, for a price.

Note: you can do something like that last part yourself. It's explained in my updated instructions.

Another problem is that while certain monsters are not vulnerable to certain attacks (mostly hypnotic, darkness, or fear), there isn't enough here. Lycanthropes, for example, should only be vulnerable to magic or magical weaponry (or at least highly resistant to normal attacks), but here, they are not. If certain monsters were not vulnerable to fire-based attacks, then this alone would make the game tricky - other magic spells, like ice or lightning, can harm the party, but you would have no choice but to use them. But all monsters are vulnerable to fire-based attack, even Fire Lizards. Storm Giants are impervious to lightning, true, but there should be more. If "magic resistance," like in AD&D, existed here, this would make fighters far more valuable, since spell casters would have trouble harming such creatures.

Graphic representation of monsters could be better. While appropriate about 70% or better of the time, a few more images would've helped.

It is impossible to call the inability to purchase magical weapons, shields, and armor a fault, since the programmer clearly intended to make it necessary to win these in combat. And this does give you a reason to keep playing! When you finally find a Mace of Miri, or a simple Mace +2, so Priests can hit twice in a round, it's a true feeling of accomplishment!

There are a few other aspects to this game that may seem to many people to be a problem, but this is one of those cases where one must consider what exactly the game was meant to be. For example, some will not like the lack of a true, final purpose, but this game was never meant to have one. There are no friendly encounters in this game, but again, this game was never meant to have any. Alignments? There isn't any reason for them. More kinds of traps, locked doors, etc.? Might have been nice, but this game was never meant to have them. Therefore, calling the lack of any of these things a fault would be like condemning Galaxian, Space Invaders, and Joust for not having power-ups or Boss monsters. Besides, other RPGs I've played, such as NES Swords and Serpents, and GBC Towers: Lord Baniff's Deceit, have extra things like riddles, keys and hidden areas, but those only matter the first time you play. I beat Towers in less than 3 weeks, and, quite frankly, it has little replay value. Lord of the Dungeon has plenty, and that says it all.

So, overall, this incredible game was a solid winner before, and it remains so now. Sure, it is lacking in some areas compared to other RPGs that I have played, and some are better, but many others just don't have staying power - this game does. It has gameplay and content far more extensive than almost any pre-NES game ever made. It is easily one of the best games ever made for the ColecoVision, and one can only wonder what the sequels would have had.