

An excerpt from "Virtual Caveman"

I admit, that has changed a bit in recent years. I eventually gave in and signed up on Steam, and there have been some genuinely great games released there which have been not only able to hold my attention, but feel like they're not weighed down with all of this modern bloat (a lot of which has seeped into the design of some of these retro-styled games I mentioned, which is another reason that I'm not a fan of them). So many of these modern games hold the player's hand, telling them where to go and what to do nearly every step of the way. Fetchquests and puzzles have oozed their way into modern incarnations of some of my favorite classics. *Castlevania: Lords of Shadow* (Xbox 360/PlayStation 3) is a perfect example of this: fetchquests for purple crystal shards and brain-bending puzzles do not belong in a game that should be all about vampire slaying. Yet, there they were. They annoyed me to the point where any interest I had in getting further in the game was killed, so I deleted it from my 360's HDD and sold the game on eBay.

I still remember the first time something like that ever happened. I bought *Shenmue* for my Dreamcast sometime in 2000. For quite a while, I was enjoying the game immensely—until the point where the main character of the game, Ryo, had to go to work. You don't have a choice, as you must get a job so the game can progress. The thrill of exploring Ryo's hometown of Yokosuka and whiling away time playing games at the You Arcade were replaced by unskippable daily forklift races and the mind-numbing chore of moving boxes from one warehouse to another. This went on, day after day, in game time. It got to the point where I felt like I was working a part-time job on top of my real life full-time job, and I wasn't getting paid for it—not even in enjoyment terms, which is a cardinal sin when it comes to gaming. Simply put, I was no longer having fun with the game at all. I lost all interest in it at that point, and I never finished the game.

The recent crop of retro-styled games from the past few years have done more to pull me in than their earlier predecessors. Games like *Shovel Knight* (2014), *Super Cyborg* (2015), *Cuphead* (2017), and *Bloodstained: Curse of the Moon* and its sequel (2018 and 2020) have done a great job of recapturing that feel, without becoming over-bloated in the process.



Cuphead (multiple consoles, 2017)

I was also never fond of the trend that had quite a few classic franchises—unless they're system sellers or household names, like half of Nintendo's library, although there have been exceptions—confined to portable consoles and digital downloads. Even years after it was released, I'm still irked that *Contra 4* was a Nintendo DS exclusive. It looks to be the best *Contra* to come along in ages,

featuring all sorts of references to the original arcade and 8-bit titles. However, it was confined to the DS. I'm getting older. My eyesight, while never having been great, is definitely not what it used to be. Why should I be forced to buy a portable console with a tiny screen just to play the latest title in one of my favorite series ever? I want to play it on my television, damn it.

Written by Rob Strangman. This excerpt from the book *Memoirs of a Virtual Caveman: The Final Edition* is © 2024 SCAR Productions. Please do not distribute without the author's permission. Direct all inquiries to Rob Strangman at [gradiusone \[at\] yahoo \[dot\] com](mailto:gradiusone@yahoo.com).