

CONVERSION CAPERS

DRAGON'S LAIR

HOW THE HELL DO YOU CONVERT DRAGON'S LAIR TO HOME SYSTEMS? THAT QUESTION HAS CONFOUNDED A NUMBER OF DEVELOPERS SINCE THE LASERDISC ARCADE GAME EMBARRASSED COMPETING COIN-OPS BACK IN 1983. MARTYN CARROLL ROUNDS UP THOSE FOOLHARDY FEW WHO TRIED AND DISCOVERS THREE VERY DIFFERENT WAYS OF APPROACHING THE SAME IMPOSSIBLE TASK

For UK gamers the first chance to play *Dragon's Lair* outside of the arcade halls came courtesy of Software Projects in 1987. The Liverpool-based publisher, desperately seeking a hit after a couple of barren years, released *Dragon's Lair* on home computers.

Despite very average review scores, the game was a faithful port of the original. Obviously we're not drawing comparisons with the original laserdisc game – we'd be dafter than Dirk himself to suggest that our beloved 8-bits could recreate the arcade experience. We're talking instead about the little-known *Dragon's Lair* game released for the Coleco Adam in 1984. The Adam was a somewhat quirky computer designed to build on the success of the ColecoVision console. It didn't, however, and was discontinued in 1985, just two years after its launch. The Adam was sold predominately in the US, but some stock was shipped overseas and it was moderately successful in France. And it was in France where Software Projects boss Alan Maton picked up a copy of *Dragon's Lair* for the Adam while on holiday. He noticed the game in a computer shop, liked the look of it and bought it out of curiosity.

Back in Liverpool, Alan acquired an Adam and loaded up the game that Coleco had apparently paid \$2 million to license. It was a curious multi-load affair with a number of varied levels loosely based

on scenes from the arcade game. He acquired the rights from Coleco and set about creating a team to port the title. John Darnell handled the Commodore 64 version; Mike Davies and Colin Hogg worked on the Amstrad CPC version while Paul Hodgson and Andy Walker were drafted in at short notice to sort out the Spectrum version. Hodgson up the story: "The *Dragon's Lair* job was a contract which Andy and I took on after the demise of Andy's software house Taskset. The Spectrum conversion wasn't going well, and whether he walked or was pushed I don't recall, but the original programmer left very suddenly. We talked to Alan, who we'd known for some time, and got the contract to finish it off. Andy did the business and I did the software. Luckily I knew pretty much nothing about the original laserdisc game otherwise I'd have run a mile!"

Hodgson instead ran to The Golden Mile to get a feel for the game. "There were no arcades near where I lived which had it, so it meant a trip over to Blackpool", he begins. "I quickly found out that *Dragon's Lair* was no ordinary game. Quite how someone decided that it would convert nicely to the Spectrum escapes me." It wasn't all bad though. The game was more or less a direct port of an existing 8-bit title (written on another Z80-powered machine) and work on the conversion had already begun when Hodgson arrived. There was a problem however. "The original programmer left a heap of unfinished, undocumented source code. It was a real mess and page after page was just sheer guesswork. So we quickly took the decision to junk most of it and start from scratch. One useful thing,

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NES

If you thought the Software Projects game was nightmarishly difficult then this NES version might just make your brain snap. It's not just hard, it's skull-splittingly hard. We'd love to tell you more about the game but after hours of prolonged play we barely made it inside Singe's castle, which is slightly worrying because you start the game standing outside the bloody front door! Dirk can jump, duck and throw daggers, but his preferred skill is collapsing into a pile of bones if anything vaguely threatening touches him. We've watched a video of the game played through to completion and it really isn't worth the hassle. A shame because the graphics are really quite special.



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SNES

Dragon's Lair on the SNES plays like an apology for the earlier NES version, making amends for many of its problems. It adopts the same side-on platforming structure but the levels are more expansive, interactive and varied. And it's far more forgiving which was thoughtful of them. The game is firmly in the *Castlevania* mould, with Dirk exploring a large castle and whacking baddies with his sword and other weapons. The graphics are great throughout, and the game opens up nicely and you delve deeper into the castle, but it's always apparent that this is *Dragon's Lair* in name only. Remove Dirk and some familiar looking enemies and you could be playing any SNES platform-athon.



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CD-ROM, MEGA-CD, 3DO, JAG

The main drawback of the 16-bit versions was that there was only so much data you could squeeze onto a floppy disk, and due to costs there were only so many floppy disks you could shovel inside a game box. The result was that many scenes were scaled down or sometimes removed altogether. However, with the advent of the CD-ROM, ReadySoft was finally able to deliver the full arcade version to PCs and consoles. Rather than recreating the original graphics it was now all about displaying full-motion video. As the technology was still in its infancy though, the quality of playback varies from system to system. The 3DO version is probably the best, while the Mega-CD version truly is a pixelated mess.



GAME BOY COLOR

Released back in 2001, this pocket-sized version definitely deserves a special mention because no one was expecting a faithful translation of the original coin-op on the GBC – a port of the SNES version seemed much more likely. Moreover, once it was announced, no one actually thought that Digital Eclipse would be able to pull it off – full-screen animation on the GBC seemed a step too far. But many were proved wrong and it worked a treat. Despite a few curtailed scenes and missing animations here and there, handheld fans really could have no complaints and it's a must-have for any fans of the series. It's perfect pick-up-and-play material, suiting the small format surprisingly well, and overall it's one *Dragon's Lair* game that no fan should be without.



**DRAGON'S
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