

Puzznic and Other Video Enigmas

By ALEX KOZINSKI

Ever since the early Greek hero Theseus escaped from Daedalus's imprisoning Labyrinth, mazes have fascinated humankind. Now, with Nintendo joystick firmly in hand, 20th-century couch potatoes can brave mazes that would put Theseus to shame. Unlike their tedious paper-and-pencil predecessors, video mazes confront the intrepid player with an almost infinite variety of challenges. Unconstrained by the laws of physics, the video Daedalus can design mazes according to the wildest flight of his imagination.

One of the finest goes by the unlikely name of "Lolo" (Hal America, \$38). Although our hero bears a striking resemblance to a billiard ball, he has managed to find himself a sweetheart, Princess Lala. Alas, their happiness is short-lived. Fair, though rotund, Lala is abducted by the Great Devil to a castle deep within his Evil Empire. Poor, love-struck Lolo manfully charges into the castle only to find he has to traverse dozens of rooms chock-full of bad guys and booby traps. Lolo has no laser guns; he's no master of Kung Fu. To save Lala from a fate worse than death, he must rely on his (or rather your) wits.

The silly story line notwithstanding, "Lolo" is a highly sophisticated game, one that separates the serious puzzler from the puzzled dabbler. It's also aesthetically pleasing: The graphics are exceptionally detailed, the colors are crisp and vivid. A password allows you to save your progress after every level. Puzzlers who master "Lolo" can graduate to "Lolo II" (\$40), more of the same but harder. For truly mind-boggling challenges, input passwords PROA, PROB, PROC and PROD.

In "Solomon's Key" (Tecmo, \$20), a diabolical Taoist monk has got his hands on King Solomon's book of magic, unleashing hundreds of demons on an unsuspecting

world. As Dana the Wizard, your mission is to locate the book and stuff the demons back where they came from. Equipped with a broad hat, cape and wand, you must make your way through 50 rooms crawling with Gargolls, Demonsheads, Sparkling Balls and all manner of other exotic creatures. "Solomon's Key" is an unusually beautiful game, and one of the most challenging. It has a major drawback, however: There's no password or continue feature. This means that when Dana loses all of his lives, you must go back to the beginning. But don't despair. Yale, our 9-year-old, reports that pint-sized operatives active in Nintendo counterintelligence have found a way to continue the struggle without repetition, at least until level 40: After the game ends (at the GDV screen), press "up" plus "A" and "B."

Other excellent maze games are "Kickie Cubicle" (Irem, \$45) and "Bomberman" (Hudson Soft, \$22). Unfortunately, one of our favorites, "Wrecking Crew" (Nintendo \$30), is no longer on the market; still, it can be obtained from the secondhand exchanges that advertise in video-game magazines. It's well worth the effort.

The rage at our house these days is "Puzznic" (Taito, \$38), which is also available in a personal computer version. "Puzznic" is not a maze; instead, you manipulate a series of cubes of different colors and patterns. When two identical cubes touch, they cancel each other out. To clear a level, you must eliminate all the cubes on the screen. While "Puzznic" starts out easy, later levels are devilishly hard to clear. Once you finish "Puzznic"—160 levels later—you'll be ready for a real challenge: "Gravnic." Rather than moving individual cubes, you change the orientation of gravity, causing all the cubes on the screen to "drop" in unison—up, down, to the right or left. "Gravnic" is included as a bonus in the "Puzznic" cartridge and has

become the specialty of our 6-year-old, Wyatt, who has managed to put the rest of us to shame. Stubbornness counts.

The phenomenal success of "Tetris" (Nintendo, \$40) has spawned several similar puzzles: Items of various shapes and sizes fall from the top of the screen and you must manipulate them into existing patterns in order to clear the level. As in "Tetris," you can vary the speed and complexity of the game, and even change the background music. These games also allow two players to compete simultaneously on a split screen.

While none of the newer games has quite the fascination of "Tetris," "Dr. Mario" (Nintendo, \$35) comes close. The game opens with a screen full of viruses: Tiny, brightly colored beasts with googly eyes, floppy ears and evil grins. From the top of the screen, Dr. Mario tosses in medicine caplets consisting of two halves, each the size and color of a virus. The trick is to line up at least four caplets and viruses of the same color—vertically or horizontally—causing all of them to disappear. You clear a level when you manage to purge the screen of viruses. When two players face off, each can adjust the level of difficulty separately; this averts the risk of humiliation by your children. "Pala-medes" (Hot-B, \$40) features dice rather than pills. The object is to arrange the falling dice in numerical patterns.

Unfortunately, most of the video games on the market continue to require the manual dexterity of an accordionist and the reflexes of a cheetah. While such games may be popular, they don't tap the microchip's vast potential for challenging the mind. The emergence of a significant number of sophisticated puzzles suggests video games may be coming of age.

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