SWITCH / PANIC!

Sega CD's Greatest Enigma

Eli Neiburger

Figure 1. PANIC! Title Screen.

A ragtime band plays. Cartoon aircraft collapse upon themselves. Ukulele-playing robots march to the sounds of war. People howl like animals. Then everything starts vomiting.

This is the introduction to SWITCH / PANIC! (Sega, 1993, see

figure 1). A thoroughly weird title made for Sega CD, this game is a bizarre mix of weird content, scatological humour, extremely simple gameplay, and nonsensical narrative, animated with a striking visual style and strange sound effects. Light on plot, but heavy on sight gags, PANIC! attempts to humorously explore the risks and consequences of rogue agents in a fully-networked world, something like "Monty Python presents: The Matrix". Requiring no skills beyond point-and-click, PANIC! expects very little of the player beyond a ready — and forgiving — sense of humor. It delivers a disc packed with content, and while the gameplay is little more than a convoluted gag browser, PANIC! manages to surprise, disgust, delight, and entertain players, while never letting you forget how weird it is.

In 1993, the 16-bit Sega Genesis was getting long in the tooth, and the Sega CD peripheral was enjoying some fragile success in North America. In Japan, the Sega Mega Drive and the Mega Drive CD were not doing as well. CD-powered consoles were still a hard sell, as so few games could convincingly show what CDs offered to players beyond better music and pre-rendered cutscenes. Naturally, into this context SEGA released a title made almost entirely of music and pre-rendered cutscenes, banking on weirdness — complete with naked robot pigs, breast-growing potions, fine art on the toilet, and lots of noisy defecation — to make the sale.

The original version, called SWITCH, was developed in Japan by a Sega first party company. The Art was provided by Renzo Kinoshita, best known for Pikadon (Kinoshita, 1978), one of the first anime to show the bombing of Hiroshima. The game score included music by Tani Kei, member of the 50's comedy band The Crazy Cats, coiner of catch-phrases and variety show staple. Risque and crass, Sega of America declined to release it in the US despite some buzz from the gaming press. However, Data East USA, obtained a license from Sega to localize and distribute SWITCH in North America. Only a cigarette vending machine and a Japanese typewriter were removed; everything else, from the breast-growing lab to the six-armed mutant who complains obliquely about a "hand job", was kept. Renamed PANIC!, the title met an antsy SEGA CD audience that had very

few titles available outside established genres, and nothing for older players beyond the infamous Night Trap (Digital Pictures, 1993) and Mortal Kombat Midway, 1992). Unsure how to market this unusual product, the Data East marketing team decided on a profile of a middle-aged man spraying milk out his nose next to the cover of the game, with the caption, "Got Panic?" This was during the era when riffing on "Got Milk?" was just starting to get old. (see figure 2).

It wasn't exactly a hit…but those who've played it can never forget it.

Figure 2. Magazine Ad for PANIC!

Experiencing PANIC!

From the opening screens:

> *Machines have suddenly begun to malfunction worldwide.*

A nasty computer virus has created software bugs in the Computer Network Server, which will infect every device on the planet. A new software program has been developed to deal with the situation… The program, code named "PANIC!" was designed to destroy the virus.

Throughout the opening, the game establishes that "malfunctions" are things like a Moai head falling on someone waiting for an elevator, a vomiting television, a lightbulb filled with fireworks, a lawnmower that plays fetch, or a parachute that ejects the wearer's entrails. Next, a simple cartoon image of a boy appears. He is dressed in pink overalls and hat. While there is no reference to the identity of the boy in-game, the manual insists his name is Slap. He presses a button on his own Sega CD controller and is transported inside the television. After this animation sequence, the only guidance for the entire game is presented, and it simply reads:

Find the buttons that will lead you to the Computer Network Server.

Figure 3. Slap finds the First Four Buttons.

The next screen shows Slap holding a blue box with four yellow buttons (see figure 3), each marked with an arrow pointing a different direction. The blue box and buttons appear over the image with a glowing rainbow cursor that responds to the D-pad. The player points the cursor at the button they wish to press and pushes any button on the controller.

This action then whisks Slap away to a new scene with a new set of buttons to push. Each scene puts Slap (and / or his dog, Stick) in some familiar or absurd situation, from train stations, backyards, or museums to cloning chambers, cyborg sumo wastelands, or just falling. Wherever they may be, there is always something with buttons to push; a lawnmower's control panel, a giant bubble machine, a plaque mounted on a statue. Each button will cause a gag, a cutscene, or a warp to a new scene. Every button is labeled, but none of labels appear to mean anything. (see figure 4).

Figure 4. Common setting, inscrutable buttons.

For example, Slap finds a toilet in space, surrounded by a spinning, glowing cube. One of its seven inscrutable buttons is labeled "1up", something meaningful at last. Upon pressing it, a giant tongue comes out of the toilet, wraps around Slap, and sucks him in. He's then excreted out the lens of a tripod-mounted camera. This scenario has nine buttons, none labeled. If what looks like it might be the shutter button is pushed, the camera saunters forward and vomits in Slap's face. Then the scene resets and Slap can choose a different button, or the same one again.

This is the entire loop of the gameplay: reach a scene, choose a button; it either plays a gag or a cutscene, or moves the player to a new scene. That's it. Gags always involve some aspect of the scene and make varying degrees of sense. A hairdryer scene includes gags like burning off Slap's hair or vomiting on him; while in another scene, each gag involves a streetcar taking on the characteristics and locomotive approach of a different insect. A hallway full of doors features gags that involve various sprites from other rooms in the game running across the hall, including crying babies, steam trains, dinosaurs, and presidents. A button on Auguste Rodin's "The Thinker" (see figure 5) causes him to get up and pull a chain to flush his pedestal; then he walks away humming. Fade to black and he's back on his seat, ready for another gag.

Figure 5. The Thinker's Gallery.

Because the gags are loaded after the player chooses a button, you can't tell if you've pressed a "good one" based on how much time elapses between your button press and the action starting. A long gag with audio and animation will take 3-5 seconds to load, while a cutscene or warp to a new scene will happen immediately. The cutscenes are particularly inscrutable; translated by Data East USA's crack localization team, most feature a character from elsewhere in the game on a flat background, often a devil or angel. All the voices have awkward accents, and the devil and angel speak differently every time they appear. In one cutscene, for example, a snorting, humanoid creature hops across the screen, naked but for zebra socks. Its knees bend the wrong way, it has green hair, and a fleshy trunk like an elephant. You hear a woman in a terrible german accent say, "Attention. A mutant haff been spotted. Approach vit caution, and plenty of kleenex." In another, apropos of nothing, the muppet-like angel appears and says: "That's funny, I always thought there was a light at the end of the tunnel. Oh well, I guess not!" While all

the cutscenes were localized, most of the gags involve no words, just muffled voice sounds of a recording made too close to the microphone or a Japanese voice actor making grunting sounds, whimpers, and groans for the characters Slap and Stick.

Figure 6. A good one.

Some of the gags are quite funny, although usually crass or scatological: Slap turns a globe into a butt (see figure 6), or drinks a potion that makes him grow breasts all over his body, or gets fish guts squirted on his face. However, some are cute and almost touching, with scenes of lovely fireworks, a dolphin leaping through a living room, dinosaurs made of lightning, or a robot pig that nurses six robotic piglets (see figure 7). Slap's normal cries of horror become gasps of appreciation or delighted laughter, and while the emotional tone can't really recover from so many bodily fluids, there is some emotional connection with the player's avatar, especially when the lazy, wide-mouthed dog Stick appears or even takes the player away from Slap for awhile. Slap and Stick are totally defenseless and at your mercy; there are moments when you feel their anxiety or delight,

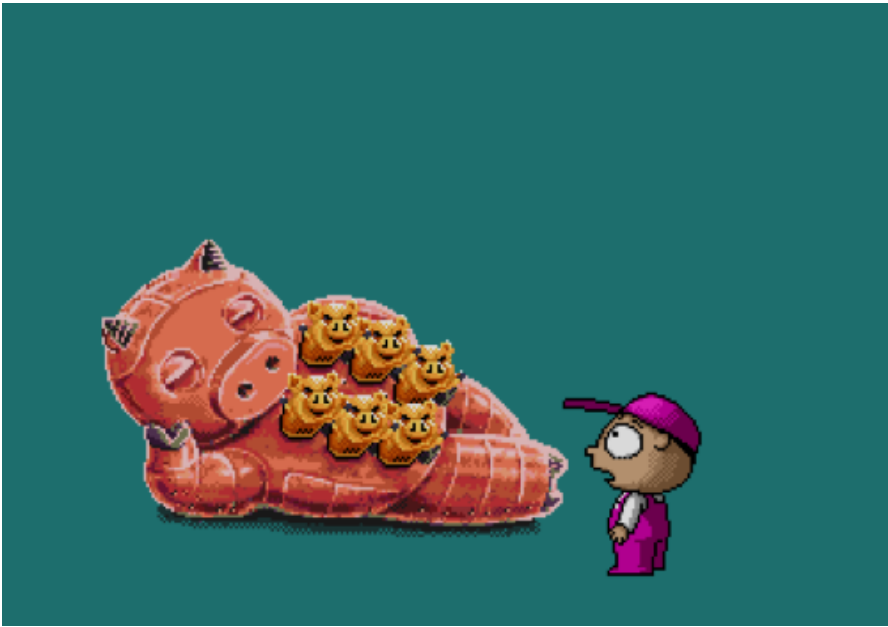but soon enough some weak body humor is back to keep it from getting remotely serious.

Figure 7. Digital Pig.

The lack of explanation or instruction means that players usually wander around bewildered for a while, riding elevators, messing around with vomiting appliances, turning Aliens into excrement, getting smashed by Tetris blocks, and occasionally triggering the destruction of world landmarks such as The Eiffel Tower or an igloo. Eventually the structure underlying this seemingly random game is revealed to the player in the form of a map displaying interconnected rooms, hidden in plain site behind a start button in a game that never needs to be paused. According to the layout of this revelatory map, the player starts at the top and must reach the glowing bottom room. Through careful observation, the structure of the game can at last be gleaned: when they player warps, they warp only to an adjacent room, and while there is no list of what buttons have been pressed, the map does show how many of the buttons in each scene have been pressed. Most importantly, the map shows what percentage of

the gags in the game have been triggered and how many of the thirty world monuments remain intact. The map also displays four ominous locations represented with the image of a leering skull and crossbones, suggesting that death is indeed possible, although rare. This cements the player's awareness of the lack of consequences for actions beyond moving towards or away from the goal; unless you're adjacent to a death square, you might destroy the Great Wall of China, but you can't die.

The game is indeed winnable, and while it's very hard to fail once you reach the final scene, it can be quite tricky to get there without an amazing memory or tedious pen-and-paper mapping of scenes and buttons. While the experience of playing PANIC! is basically clicking through a fever dream of a hypercard stack, it is fun to play, fun to beat, and here we are talking about it twenty years later.

Failures

Just because PANIC! is unique and enjoyable doesn't make it a successful game. It takes patience and dedication to believe that PANIC! is fun, not to mention a high tolerance for grade school humor.

The biggest problem with the game is that while there is a spatial map that is viewable and knowable, the actions available to the player do not map to directions, making it extremely difficult to build a mental map of the game space that feels at all navigable. In addition, because the buttons are labeled with an effort to not disclose any clues or meanings, it's very difficult for players to remember cause / effect pairs with so many forgettable buttons, making even repeat visits to scenes where every button has been previously pushed a frustrating puzzle. Most unfortunately, the forgettable buttons even prevent the player from easily remembering which buttons they were most drawn to, leading them to press the same buttons on repeat visits to scenes and get stuck in a loop of a few scenes, wandering through a small set, inadvertently pressing the same buttons each time. Some places on the map seem designed to exacerbate this, with buttons that warp to

another spot in the same loop, offering a different action but the same frustrating result. While the feeling of triumph upon breaking out of such a loop is significant, it's quickly replaced with "why did they put me through that?" and some well-placed ire towards the game.

Then there's the gags. While there a few gags that are still amazing and laugh-out-loud funny even after repeated viewings, most of them are lame and predictable. You just know that any appliance or machine can eventually be made to vomit and that anything flying or floating will fall tragically. Some of the scenes go for a cute sense of wonder, offering a lovely set of animations that delight Slap, and to a lesser extent, the player. However, as if there were some megabyte quota to fill (and perhaps there was) there are usually so many permutations of these ideas behind different buttons, that they wear out their welcome and you're ready for another poop joke already. Take the snowman scene; serene and peaceful, gentle music plays as the dog snores contentedly. Some gags make the snow light up in different colors, or grow into giant snowflakes; Slap and Stick cavort in delight. Then a gag makes it snow little brown piles (see figure 8), and Slap and Stick run in horror. While Slap's entertaining revulsion carries the scene past whatever shock the player can still muster at such content, the next time you land in the snowman room you do not want to see it again.

Figure 8. The Worst Snow.

For all the intentional zaniness and weirdness of this title, by the time you reach this scene, it's hardly surprising or funny. Some of the content is just never funny or weird, not even in context. For example, one scene is a TV studio control room with sixteen screens of static. All the gags in this room involve the screens interacting with each other or changing shape, with a few bodily humor jokes, and there's just not enough to hang so many different animations on to keep the player from wanting to flee.

The cutscenes are clearly where the weird is truly juiced up. All the sprites from the game get a second chance to appear, usually with a voice, but never in any way related to the scene that triggered the cutscene. The pointless, humorless script and terrible accents in these clips suggest refusal to entertain or move the player forward, making the player feel punished.The devil and the angel are particularly unsettling and never add delight, wonder, or even add weirdness to a scene. One devil cutscene shows him sleeping; he wakes up and says, "Hey, I was sleeping!" (see figure 9).
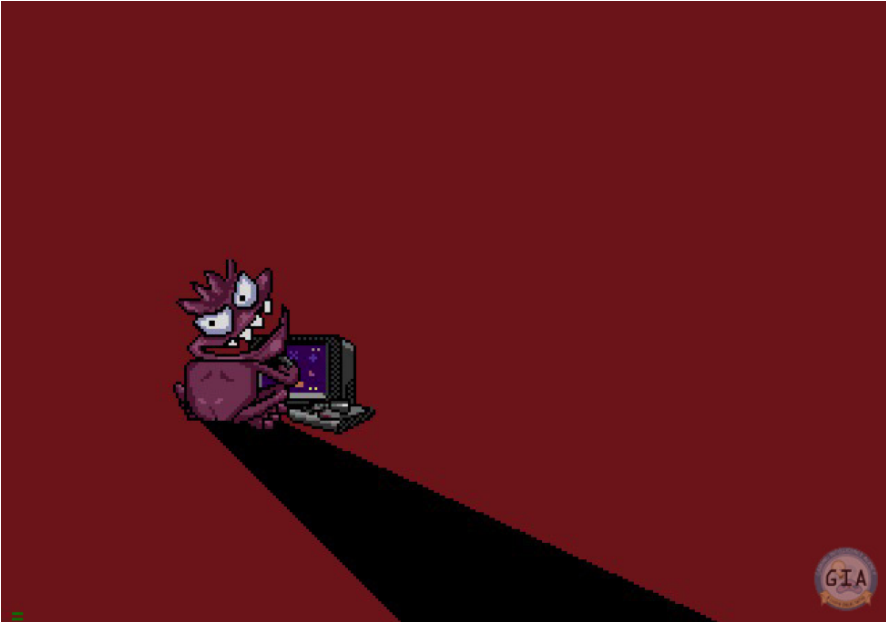
Figure 9. A devil cutscene.

But the biggest challenge of the game is that despite its parade of zany gags atop a strict structural order, is that it ultimately requires either a feat of memory to navigate the game intuitively, or tedious note-taking with very few landmarks to navigate by. Neither of these make for a big heap of fun and put all the work on the player. At least you can save anywhere and everywhere, which the developers must have known would keep players from dismissing the game permanently in disgust. And it's a good thing, too, because the reward of the title comes from seeing as much as there is to see, putting the disjointed scenes back together, and feeling the completist thrill of having seen it all.

Success

For all its challenges, PANIC! succeeds at being completely unique, not just on its platform or in its generation, but among most of the videogame canon. There are very few games that strike out solely for comedy, reducing the gameplay to a basic comedy navigation

device. While PANIC! is so loaded with content, many scenes deploy obvious or non-entertaining gags. It's the few true gems scattered through the game that truly surprise and delight. The game makes it so easy to see how many of the gags you've seen, even putting the percentage of the content that you've viewed on the game load screen, where Link's hearts would go. This does effectively ramp up the desire to see every gag, and even destroy every landmark, to get to 100% and 0/30 landmarks remaining. The positive goal of seeing every gag and the negative result of destroying landmarks is the game's "hard mode", the objective being to see every gag without destroying any landmarks and reach 100% and 30/30 landmarks remaining; in other words to press all the buttons in the game except for 30 hidden ones.

The combination of normal and mundane scenes where weird and weirder gags happen sends the player looking for the extremes; the cutest gag, the least obvious excretion, the funniest reaction from Slap or Stick, the most unusual mutation of a work of art are all in there; and you'll never know as a player if you've found them unless you see them all. The extremes do drive the player to want to visit every scene just to see how weird it gets, and press every button just to see what's next. Driving completism without collectible objects (although the buttons pressed could be called collectables) is an impressive feat of induced motivation, especially considering how lukewarm much of the content can be.

That said, PANIC! also employs a strong and consistent aesthetic, albeit it one with expansive edges into other looks and visual vocabularies. It's an impressive attempt to span so many types of art, music, and comedy. From Gilliamesque heads of presidents grafted onto infant bodies and crying obnoxiously, to the set of monoliths that trap Slap and Stick in a variety of biomes, to the frequent appearance of indigestion and household appliances, the gags eventually establish a groove that makes setups and payoffs resonate with the player. This ultimately brings some familiarity and comfort to the weirdness and helps the player feel like they know what they're doing amidst all the zaniness.

Figure 10. The Computer Network Server (Infected).

And while the final gag-free, warp-free showdown with the virus to bring enlightenment to the mind of the Computer Network Server (see figure 10) is in sharp and serious contrast to the rest of the game, PANIC! ultimately delivers a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction. Considering the pile of ridiculous gags the player waded through and the repetition they endured on the way to this moment, that's a game design achievement. Even though you might never know what's going to happen next, if you keep at it, you'll eventually accomplish something, and that's a nice idea to come out of such a weird package.

What Does it Mean?

It's very difficult to find the business case, let alone the aesthetic one, that justifies the existence of this game. In many ways it has the whiff of desperation from top to bottom; developers desperate to make something different, designers desperate to fill 650mb, artists

and musicians desperate to make a title entertaining that makes some of the same lame jokes over and over. But in the early 1990s, before multimedia became a thing that computers did, market desperation drove some unusual choices. The April 1993 release of SWITCH in Japan was months before the September 1993 release of Myst (Cyan, 1993), which changed the paradigm for CD-ROM games completely and brought in a huge new audience desperate to understand why they needed a CD-ROM drive on their computer. That said, It's still baffling that Data East took the chance on turning SWITCH into PANIC!. Data East's reputation rested mostly on their 80's arcade hits and late-entry pinball tables, so perhaps they saw this localization opportunity as a chance to remake their image.

If the game is viewed through that multimedia lens, it's not quite as weird; with appropriateness aside, PANIC! is much like a Putt Putt (Humungous Entertainment,, 1992) or Freddi Fish (Humungous Entertainment, 1994-) edutainment title with no curriculum. You click on things, and funny things happen. PANIC! seems to subscribe to the notion that the true object of a game is to see everything it has in store, and the gameplay is simply a method to access the content. That's a distillation of the experience of playing many different types of game, and PANIC! heaps so much content on the table the player is always wondering what might be in there that they missed. This might also further explain the crass tone of almost every scene; while it certainly had market value, the mild edginess of the title challenges the player to imagine what the most twisted scene or gag in the game could be, and set off in search of it.

However, there is something powerful in the extremely low-risk atmosphere of the game, Slap's sitcom-like ability to feel no permanent effects from any episode and the very few buttons that can actually lead to death. Like the Putt Putt and Freddi Fish creators knew, exploration happens best in the absence of threat, and in the absence of consequence the player does feel a freedom to explore this bizarre world at their leisure. In fact, the first time the player detonates a monument, it's not immediately clear if something good or bad just happened; while the relatively realistic demolition

sequences are lovingly put together and quite entertaining, unlike the rest of the gags in the game, when the screen fades to black after the cutscene, that button has now been taped over and can't be pushed again. Consequence at last, and it's too late to un-push that button. No buttons can be un-pushed, they can only be pushed, and this gives the player that powerful illusion of control over their fate. You can go anywhere you want… within this scatological hellscape in which you've been imprisoned.

Much of the game's residual appeal comes from the same place as so-bad-its-good ironic enjoyment or marvelling at the primitive technologies on display, but this is still a quite remarkable title for the SegaCD. The amount of content packed onto the disc is astounding, and it's in some ways a spiritual ancestor to later deeply unusual triumphs like Parappa the Rapper (Sony, 1996) or Katamari Damacy (Namco, 2004). It was fun at parties for about twenty minutes at a stretch back in the 90s, and it still is today. Despite the de- or re-weirding that this quintessentially Japanese title received at the hands of its North American Localizers, PANIC! is still a game worth playing, talking about, and experiencing, to see what "weird" meant then, and what weird still means now.

Apparently, it has something to do with going to the bathroom.