The Lost Vikings

By Bobinator

**The Lost Vikings, 1992, SNES, Genesis, Amiga, DOS, Game Boy Advance**

Long before Blizzard became known for their RTSes, that one Starcraft action game that will never see release, and that one MMO thing they did to try to steal Everquest’s thunder, Blizzard were known for being a console developer, more than anything else. In fact, even before they were known as Blizzard, they went under the name Silicon & Synapse. It was under this name they’d release their first game, and while it’s been mostly forgotten these days, it’s worth a whole lot more as a series than just the first game of such a well known developer.

The game itself was inspired by Lemmings, as the developers liked the way multiple characters with different abilities worked together to solve puzzles. At first, the game involved lots of Vikings on screen, before being simplified down to five, and then only three. The major difference from the Lemmings series, though, is that it’s more of an action game with puzzle elements, since you have full control over all three characters.

The story is that three Vikings, Erik the Swift, Baelog the Fierce, and Olaf the Stout, have been abducted by the evil alien emperor Tomator. (Who, oddly enough, looks nothing like a tomato)He plans to place them in an intergalactic zoo, and he Vikings, not liking this idea, escape from their cells. The first few stages take place aboard Tomator’s spaceship, but each set of levels is a new time period the Vikings find themselves ending up in on their journey home. It’s a pretty simple plot, but there’s still a lot of goofy dialogue packed in there, especially among the Vikings themselves.

The game is partly a platformer, and partly a puzzle game. You can’t really call it just one or the other, because only one of the characters can actually jump, and there’s too much reflexes involved to call it a pure puzzle game. The goal of each of the 37 (41, if you’re playing the Genesis version) is to lead all three of your Vikings to exit. However, you can only control one Viking at the time, so it’s important to use each of their abilities together so that all three can make it safely to the goal.

You can switch between your Vikings at any time, but the ones that you aren’t controlling will stay where you left them. If they’re in the middle of an enemy or hazard, this WILL mean that they’ll probably end up dead if you don’t quickly switch over and move them to safety. Each Viking can only take three hits, barring health powerups you can pick up and use. They’ll also die instantly from long enough falls, as well as hazards like grinders and water. If any of them die, you’re basically screwed, as even if you bring less than three to the exit, it still counts as a level failure.

Each Viking has his own unique abilities that you’ll need to use to progress. Eric’s the fastest, and the only one that can actually jump. Since this game is a platformer, that means you’ll be using him a lot. He can also headbutt certain walls and enemies, which will destroy them, but leave Eric stunned for a few seconds. Baelog has a sword for attacking enemies at close range, as well as a bow he can use to kill enemies and hit far away switches. Olaf has a big shield that can block projectiles, and he can hold it over his head to glide, as well as letting other Vikings use it as a platform.

With only one Viking to play as, you’d hardly get anywhere, but it’s the way their abilities combine where most of the game’s puzzles come into play. For example, you come across a hallway with a laser turret, neither Eric nor Baelog would be able to get through it without getting killed. Olaf, however, can block it with his shield so that the other two can pass through. Or, if there’s a drawbridge with a button to lower it nearby, Eric can use Olaf’s shield for just enough distance he can cross the gap, hit the button, and let all three Vikings across.

Besides each viking’s abilities, they also each have their own inventory, which can hold four items each. Some of these are powerups you can use to heal hurt Vikings, and some of them help you against enemies, like fire arrows for Baelog. There’s also different colored keys to find, as well as bombs you’ll need to blow up certain things in the level to advance. The problem is since each Viking can only hold so many things, you may have to do some inventory management, either by trading things between each other, or by getting rid of them entirely. Just make sure you don’t toss anything you actually need.

Like any good platformer, there are plenty of enemies to fight, and for the most part, Baelog is the only one who can actually kill them. The problem is that enemies attack pretty quickly, and you don’t get a whole lot of invincibility time, so it’s a good idea to bring Olaf’s shield with you so you don’t end up dead. A lot of enemies also use projectiles, and since Baelog doesn’t have the manuveraiblity to dodge them, bringing Olaf with him is a smart idea there, too. Basically, you want to bring Olaf everywhere you can, although since he can’t jump, there are quite a few places one of your other Vikings will have to go without his protection.

Besides enemies, there’s plenty of hazards and level gimmicks to make use of. Early on, you have buttons that can be pressed to activate certain things, fireball spewing stone carvings Olaf has to block, and bubbles that a Viking can catch a ride on. Each world also has its own things you’ll need to use to complete a puzzle. The spaceship has anti-gravity walls which make your Vikings float upward, potentially into something that’ll kill them. The factory world has giant magnets that one Viking can control, which he can use to pick up certain objects, and even other Vikings. And the ‘wacky’ world has air pumps the Vikings can use to inflate themselves to new heights, if they don’t end up popping themselves on one of the many spikes covering the ceilings first.

With the three character concept, you’d think that the game would be hard to pick up on, but it actually does explain things pretty well. The first few stages get you used to the game and the vikings’ abilities pretty slowly, and pretty much every time you encounter a new thing, there’ll be a tutorial box there to tell you about it. That’s not to say the game doesn’t get hard, almost punishingly so. The first few levels aren’t so bad, but as you get further in, it gets to the point where a single spot of bad timing can cost you victory, whether it’s the result from a particularly bad run-in with an enemy or one of the many hazards you’ll come across.

Thankfully, though, you get infinite retries, so you can repeat a level as many times as you need to. Do it too often, though, and the Vikings will start to comment on your incompetence. If you die a LOT, Thor himself will pop in to tell you how much you suck. Although the game uses passwords, they’re all only four letters long, so it’s pretty easy to stop and pick up where you left off, which is great for a puzzle-oriented game.

There’s five different worlds in the game, each with its own unique theme. While the fact that you from Prehistoric times to Egypt would make you think that you’d mostly be time traveling, eventually you move on to a long-abandoned factory, to a world with levels made entirely from candy. How very Zool. The final stages take place aboard the same starship you started the game on, only everything is much, much harder than when you left it. This is also where the game’s only boss fight takes place, as you use the three viking’s abilities to defend against Tomator’s attacks, knock him into various hazards, and chase him across the level.

Besides the one player mode, you can have two players control the Vikings. Basically, how it works is that each player always controls one Viking, and can switch over to the one that’s not in use. The issue with this mode is that the camera is always focused on the first player, so unless you’re anywhere close to your co-op partner, they’re not going to be able to do anything. Still, it’s a nice idea, although a bit janky in actual use.

One of the things that make the game so worth playing, besides the fact that it’s a generally good game, is all the silly dialogue you’ll come across as you play. Besides the conversations you get for failing a level enough times, the Vikings converse among themselves at the end of every level. At the end of one of them, Olaf wonders if Tomator is so evil, why he keeps leaving behind bombs and machines to help them. He’s told to shut up, because nobody else in video games ever wonders about these kinds of things.

The graphics are decent for the system, if not especially amazing. The sprites are a little small, but the Vikings have a decent number of animations on them, and everything has a generally cartoony style that goes well with the game’s tone. Each world has a couple of different themes to it, which keeps every stage from looking too samey. The music itself is pretty great, and it’s probably one of the funkiest soundtracks you’ll hear on a 16-bit game since Toejam & Earl.

The game was released on pretty much every major system at the time, and they’re all worth playing, although the Genesis version trumps them all. It has four extra stages the other versions don’t, as well as short cutscenes that play before the start of each world, which show off something you’ll encounter during your time there. It also has a soundtrack composed by Matt Furniss, which, in this writer’s personal opinion, edges out over the other versions. You probably WILL need a six button controller, and while you CAN use a three button controller, you pretty much have to do everything with the Start button, so you might as well save yourself a little trouble.

The SNES version isn’t so bad, either, although the fact that it doesn’t have the extra levels over the Genesis version makes it not quite as worth looking into. Although, you don’t need any sort of special controller to play, since the SNES controller already comes with enough buttons to do everything. The music on this version isn’t bad, either, although it has a pretty different sound compared to the Genesis.

The Amiga version is based more on the SNES version’s soundtrack and set of levels, but its issue is that since the Amiga joystick only has one button, you pretty much have to do EVERYTHING with the keyboard, which is sort of a hassle. The DOS version has the same issue, but is otherwise a decent port, if you can get past the button layout. The music isn’t as good, however, since it’s played through the Sound Blaster or Adlib. Or the PC Speaker, too, but would you really want to do that?

The Game Boy Advance Version, released about 11 years after the original version, is pretty much the worst version you could get next to the Amiga version. The main issue is they tried to put a game that could only be comfortably played with six buttons on a handheld with only four. Not only that, but the fact that the screen size is so much smaller makes moving around tougher, although, to their credit, they changed the HUD so it doesn’t block the screen. The music also suffers from the GBA’s rather weak sound hardware, and it basically sounds like the SNES version, only much more muffled.

Overall, The Lost Vikings is a pretty neat idea for a puzzle game, and it works pretty well. The way that you’ll end up in situations where a single mistake can undo long periods of work may frustrate some, but there’s an interesting concept, some good puzzles, and some fantastic music in there to make it worth playing through.

**The Lost Vikings II/Norse By Norsewest: The Return Of The Lost Vikings, 1997, Super Nintendo, DOS, Playstation, Sega Saturn**

Not too long after the release of the original Lost Vikings, Blizzard had made it big with games like Warcraft, one of the RTSes that would go on to shape the fledging genre, and Diablo. So much so, that the box for the SNES version of this game specifically says it was by the guys who did Warcraft. Surprisingly, though, even with all that success, they would go on to make one more Lost Vikings game before focusing on the PC market entirely. The SNES version was released extremely late in the console’s lifespan, that’s probably why an enhanced version was made for the current consoles of the time. Besides the name change, they’re more or less the same game with some visual enhancements.

After the events of the first game, Olaf, Erik, and Baelog went on to resume their usual Viking lives. While they’re out on a fishing trip, however, the evil Tomator once again brings them aboard his spaceship. His ship suffers a sudden power failure, and the Vikings steal some gadgets from one of Tomator’s robots and make for the nearest transporter. Once again, they have to make their way through 31 levels across time and space to make their way home.

The basic gameplay concept is the same as the first game. You have three characters, and it’s your goal to bring them all to the end of the level. Lose any of them, and you’ll have to do the level again. To aid you in this task, you can use and combine your characters’ abilities in different ways to get through each obstacle. Everything works pretty much the same way it did in the first game, although there are a few new things.

All the Vikings have new gear, and with it, new moves to go along with all their old ones. Erik can double jump to reach high places and smash blocks above him. He can also swim underwater, which is especially useful since the other Vikings still can’t. Baelog traded in his bow and arrow for a bionic arm, which he can use to hit enemies and pick up things from long range. To make the homage complete, he can even swing across gaps, although only from certain swing points, sadly. Olaf can shrink himself to fit through tiny passages, and, well, to put it bluntly, fart to give himself a boost while gliding and to bust blocks below him.

Much like the original game, there’s five different worlds, each split into a number of levels. You go from Transylvania, to a pirate ship, eventually ending the game in a post-apocolyptic wasteland where you get into another fight with Tomator. Sadly, however, there are more levels made out of candy. There’s a few new level gimmicks involved as well, like ropes your characters can climb hand over hand across or pull themselves up onto.

The other major addition are two new characters, Fang the Werewolf and Scorch the Dragon. You’ll never have more than three characters in your party at the time, but in each level, you may have some of your characters swapped out, or end up having less than three. Fang can attack at short range with his claws, and he has Erik’s jump. Unlike Erik, he can perform a very Mega Man X-esque wall jump. Scorch can fly upwards, although he gets tired quickly, and he can glide down from high places safely. He can also shoot long range fireballs.

The new moves and the new characters are nice, but something about the new characters feels a little lacking in creativity. They can both jump, for one thing, and instead of having some new power, they just attack. Not that their attacks aren’t useful, it just would have been nice to see something a little more creative. The new powers on the Vikings are nice, though, even though they all feel so much more specific in their use than the old ones did. It all feels very ‘see this thing, use this viking’. Not that the first game didn’t do it, but here it feels a little more blatant about it.

There’s still a ton of dialogue, and the game still never takes itself anywhere close to seriously. The post-death conversations are still there, with lines like one of the characters complaining about how sequels are cheap ways for video game companies to make money when they’re out of ideas. The irony is smoldering.

There’s actually a way to suck so hard that the game takes pity on you and gives all your characters whole new powers. The first level of the game is more or less a straight line, with no enemies or hazards. However, there IS one way to kill off a Viking in it, and if you find it, the game will grant all your characters new powers. Erik will now be able to throw fireballs out of his hands, Street Fighter style. Baelog can hit enemies with a forward leap as well as going into a slashing frenzy. Olaf can turn into a skull, which kills the nearest enemy. Fang steals another Street Fighter move by electrifying himself, hurting all enemies near him, and Scorch gets infinite flying time. If that weren’t enough, you unlock a level skip feature. It’s basically a cheat mode with a really obtuse way to unlock it, but it’s still pretty awesome.

The Super Nintendo version of the game is pretty decent, and the art style is closer to the first game. The music, although the instrumentation is a little fancier, has the same style as the first game, although, sadly, it’s missing the Matt Furniss-ness of the Genesis version.

Norse by Norsewest, the version made for the CD systems, is more of a remake than a straight port. It has all the same levels and features as the SNES version. The graphics and sound, however, are completely different, and not always in a good way. Since old-fashioned spriteworked probably wouldn’t have flown on Sony’s console, everything’s now pre-rendered. This looks OK for the stages themselves, but the characters themselves are done in a super-deformed style. It looks especially bad up close, like in the new FMV cutscenes, where the Vikings end up looking more like Muppets than human beings.

On the plus side, all the dialogue is now voice acted, and they got together a pretty all-star cast for the game. Among the voice cast are Robert Paulsen, Jeff Bennett, Frank Welker, Tress MacNeille, and Jim Cummings, who, surprising nobody, voices the bad guy. He also voices the tutorial messages, in the smuggest sounding voice you’ll probably hear anybody give a tutorial in. If you’ve watched pretty much any cartoon at all in the 90’s, you’ll recognize at least of them from their first line, and it really helps a lot towards the whole cartoon vibe. The music is also entirely different from the SNES version, or either of the two games entirely.

The biggest issue is that it feels like they barely did anything at all to do anything with the CD format. Sure, the voice acting is nice, but there’s nothing you haven’t seen in the SNES version. The game doesn’t even save to memory, something which was downright criminal for a game made in 1997. There’s no new levels, characters, or anything of the sort. It’s too bad, it would have been nice to see a new world with the extra disc space. As for which version you should go for, is a matter of personal opinion. The Super Nintendo version definitely looks better, but you might prefer having the voice acting of the CD version. All the CD versions are more or less identical, although if you play the DOS version, you’re really going to want some sort of gamepad. Sadly, all the CD versions are missing the secret powers completely, so if you try to pull off that trick, nothing will end up happening.

The sequel isn’t a bad game at all compared to its predecessor, but the problem is that the concept just doesn’t feel as fresh as it did in the first game. They try to put in some new ideas, to be fair, but they all feel like remixes of the old ones. Still, if you enjoyed the first game enough that you want more of it, you’ll probably end up liking it.

Besides the two Lost Vikings games, Olaf also makes an appearance in one of Blizzard’s other early games, Rock N’ Roll Racing. He’s a secret character that can be unlocked and played with using a cheat code, and he’s one of the best racers in the game.

After the second game, Blizzard would end up moving onto the PC market, leaving the Vikings behind besides the one subpart port for the Game Boy Advance. They haven’t forgotten them completely, with Olaf, Baelog, and Erik showing up as cameos in World of Warcraft, and there’s a hidden arcade game in Starcraft 2 called The Lost Viking. Sadly, it’s just a simple SHMUP that has nothing to do with the actual characters.