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No Escape! - Atari 2600 (1983)

The Imagic team cranked out a lot of games in a short period of time. In fact, between 1982 and 1983, they released no less than 17 titles for the Atari 2600, and had a few more in the works before the market went sour, and that's not counting their output on other consoles and home computers of that era. Not all of those games were hits, mind you, but outside of one or two duds, they were all held to a pretty high standard of quality. No Escape! is one such game.

The game takes place in ancient Greece, and the main character is a guy named Jason, whose recently angered the gods of Olympus by stealing the golden fleece. Instead of merely smiting the boy and calling it a day, as Greek gods are often depicted, they decided to put him through some horrible, sadistic punishment, from which there is... anyway. Suddenly, Jason finds himself trapped in a temple, swarmed by fierce creatures known as "Furies." Armed with little more than a rock, he needs to find a way to...

Whatever, it's Atari, how complicated can it be, right? From the look of the main game, it's clearly a single-screen shooter of some sort, and a sparsely populated one at that. Your character is on the bottom of the screen, Furies fly mindlessly back and forth, you move from side to side with the joystick and throw the rock with fire button, all very standard, but there's a catch. Throwing your rock at the Furies doesn't actually kill them. In fact, while it's not immediately apparent, hitting the Furies directly will actually cause them to multiply. Instead, what you need to do is deliberately miss the Furies, and hit the ceiling of the temple, up at the top of the screen, causing a piece of it to break off and fall. If this falling brick then hits a Fury on it's way down, <i>that</i> will kill them, and the others will adjust their formation to compensate, but watch out, because if struck by a brick yourself, you too will take damage.

This unique approach has led more than one person to describe the game as a hybrid between a shooter and a Breakout style puzzler, which is not a particularly accurate analogy, but is about as close to a working comparison as we're going to get, so it'll have to do. Because of this odd characteristic, No Escape! has a completely different feel to any other shooter from that time, or, for that matter, any other shooter since, which is no small feat in a time when "Pac-Man Clone" was an entire genre unto itself.

Take out every Fury on the screen and you advance to the next level, though not before picking up bonus points for every brick still attached to the ceiling. From level 2 onward, the Furies will start shooting back at you, and each stage thereafter sees them move a bit faster and in slightly more complex patterns. You can only throw a single stone at a time, either straight up or, if you press the fire button while holding the joystick to either the left or the right, throw a stone that starts off hooking to one side or the other before inexplicably correcting it's trajectory and heading straight up. If a part of the ceiling has no more bricks, stones thrown in that region will just fly through the hole. You technically have a health bar, but since you only have one life, it's pretty much just a graphic representation of a lives counter. You start off able to take four hits, either from enemy projectiles, or falling bricks, and each stage you clear grants you another hit, up to a maximum of eight. This can be altered by flipping the left difficulty switch, so that you only get an extra hit if you clear a stage without taking any damage. Once your health bar drops to zero, the game ends, and you watch a short animation of recently deceased Jason riding a winged horse into the sky. I'm only marginally sure that any of this would make sense to someone familiar with Greek mythology.

This being an Atari game, the ultimate goal is to get the best possible score, which you must dutifully write down yourself after the game over animation has ended.

One of the other things that makes this game so great, or at least so unique (sorry to gush), is the pace. No Escape! is about as deliberately slow and methodical as you can get, owing perhaps to the fact that it's not a port of an arcade game, and doesn't need to be quick and dirty. Concentration and precision are the key to success. You need to watch enemy patterns very carefully and attack at the opportune moment. Players who become impatient or reckless in their attacks will find the game very unforgiving, and the thing with the Furies multiplying is only the beginning.

In later stages, not content to merely sway back and forth, Furies begin reacting to your attacks, either by suddenly changing direction, slowing down, or rushing towards the stone, literally trying to get hit so as to multiply. To some extent, this behaviour can be manipulated to your advantage. If it looks like an attack is going to miss, just throw another stone, and try to time it so that one of the Furies rushes into the falling brick. This can be fairly effective, but it also means using twice as many throws for each enemy, and therefore twice as many wasted throws if it doesn't work. It's also theoretically possible to take out every brick on the first level, leading to a stalemate, but seriously, you'd have to <i>really</i> want this to happen.

As time goes on, the enemies become better able to sense your presence, or some nonsense like that, meaning that instead of just randomly throwing things at the ground, their projectiles will suddenly start flying in your direction. To this end, the game's difficulty becomes severely imbalanced by about the fourth or fifth level, and progress made beyond that point is dependent on a great deal of pinpoint timing, or dumb luck. On the other hand, the controls are tight and responsive, and the game doesn't have any major bugs to deal with, so it's perhaps possible, with enough persistence, to advance to the later stages. Either way, the difficulty doesn't ruin the game, not by a long shot, but it does stand out, given how refined it is in every other department.

Speaking of refined, the graphics are great. Sprites are comprised of more than one colour and are surprisingly well animated. The Furies cycle through completely different designs every couple of stages. The sound effects, are fine, if not all that interesting, but the music is downright ominous. It's made up of nothing but these throbbing, fuzzy bass notes, droning over and over again at a steady rhythm. As you kill Furies, the pattern changes, but the pulse stays the same. Not the most complex game music, but it definitely enhances the atmosphere, plus, the music is wonderfully integrated into the gameplay. Enemy attacks will occur at regular intervals, in time with the music, so it's definitely in your best interest to keep the sound on.

There are, as was typical with Atari games, multiple game settings, which allow you to choose between one or two player games, as well as higher difficulty settings, which causes the Furies to move faster and with more complex patterns, possibly just starting you off at a higher level, though I haven't made it far enough myself to verify. The difficulty switches can also be used, as mentioned earlier, to make gaining extra hits on your health bar a lot harder to do, with each switch corresponding to an individual controller port, allowing skilled players to put themselves at a handicap when playing with a beginner. Although both players technically have to play at the same difficulty level, this does a pretty good job of hobbling those much needed extra hits, so it does partially balance things out.

Two player mode is hardly spectacular, it's merely a turn-based version of one player mode, each time you beat a stage, the other player gets a turn, and if one player dies, the other gets to keep playing until he also kicks the big one, the two scores are then compared. As far the different difficulty settings are concerned, it's almost as if they're only there for show. It's a pretty tough game on the easiest setting; cranking it up from there is just plain unfair, but if you want to see just how crazy things can get, you're always free to take a look.

If you've ever merely stumbled across a cheap copy of this game at a flea market, or are one of those people who's gone ahead and downloaded every 2600 game the internet could provide (you and I both), then No Escape! probably held your attention for about 30 before you figured must be broken or something and went on with your life... or maybe that was just me. Either way, this game is, I think, a rare gem from the early days of home gaming, if not for sheer creativity, then for mashing genres together in order to create something that's still unique today.

Incidentally, while there's never been a game quite like No Escape!, there have been a few other games <i>called</i> No Escape over the years.

In 1994, a <a href="http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0110678/">movie</a> called No Escape was released, starring Ray Liotta as a man who's sent to a prison where the inmates are let loose in the wild to fend for themselves in a barbaric society, kind of like Lord of the Flies, but with a hint of sci-fi, and not anywhere near as well written. Naturally, a licensed game was released to tie in with the film, which came out for the SNES and Genesis. It's a 2D platformer of sorts, and truth be told, it's not very good. Controls are tough to get used to, and it's never entirely clear what you're supposed to do from one level to the next. For instance, as soon as the game starts, you're thrown into the first level, and almost immediately, you get swarmed by these tribal looking goons. You can try to fight back, but more just keep showing up until you end up getting overwhelmed, then killed. What you're actually supposed to do is run away from them, while dodging traps you can't possibly know are there until it‘s too late to avoid them, this is followed by a one on one fight scene, then another level of getting chased by goons, <i>then</i> the level select screen comes up. Apparently, from this point, there’s some backtracking and adventure game style puzzles to figure out, but for all I know, I'm being lied to about that, and it's really not worth playing the game any further to find out.

In 2000, a PC shooter was also released under the name No Escape. Developed by Funcom, the people behind Age of Conan, No Escape is an online-centric third person arena shooter with a cartoony, bloodless art style. From what I can tell, it appears to be one of those games where the whole “deathmatch” thing is framed as some kind of futuristic game show, and aside from merely gunning each other down (though not actually killing each other), players drop coins when hit, and cash wads when “knocked out,” which others can pick up, and it‘s your cash total that factors into your ranking as opposed to merely how many technically-not-kills you’ve racked up. The most distinctive feature is that the game took place on these spherical surfaces, not unlike Animal Crossing, but even more accented. Funcom’s own website disavows any knowledge of the game, but the demo is still floating around on the interwebs. The question is, is it worth seeking out? No, not really. The controls are floaty, the spherical art style makes shooting awkward, the imprecise weapons don’t help either, the characters are unattractive, and… well, really, it’s mostly the floatycontrols. Even as a curio, it’s just not all that remarkable. It was fairly mediocre by early 2000s standards, and hasn’t aged well at all in the years since.

Links

<a href=“http://www.atariage.com”>Atari Age</a> As always, a treasure trove of information, and box scans.

<a href=“http://download.cnet.com/No-Escape-updated-demo/3000-7563\_4-10050476.html”>No Escape Demo</a> Give it a go if you’d like.