

I still remember the first time I saw Tetris. I was in college, and it appeared one weekend at the campus hangout for students who didn't know where the cool off-campus parties were. I played a game of it, and it was like no other game I'd seen before. I played a few more games and walked away, thinking "Cool game. Too bad it'll never take off." I figured that people who played games in arcades weren't into a game where you had to actually think. Blowing stuff up (and beating stuff up) seemed to be their forte, so I figured Tetris would go down in history as an admirable but failed experiment. Okay, so I was wrong. I have no problem admitting that. I've been wrong about video games before. The first time I played Pac-Man I thought it was stupid and utterly forgettable.

As everybody knows by now, Tetris went on to become a tremendous hit. I'm still trying to figure out exactly *how*, but I'm glad. Tetris deserved every bit of its success. It also introduced us to its designer Alexey Pajitnov, probably the only Russian non-politician people under the age of 30 know by name. Alexey has gone on to produce more games, including Welltris, Wordtris, Faces (well, nobody's perfect), and Super Tetris. All his games are based on non-violent real-time puzzle solving, with a generous amount of arcade action thrown in for adrenal purposes. Now Alexey has a line of puzzle game endorsements with Spectrum Holobyte. These are games that Alexey didn't create himself, but they follow his principles of design. The first game of this series was Breakthru, released last year. This game of falling blocks did what very few games of its type have done: rise above the countless hordes of Tetris clones to provide us with a totally different falling block game. Although Alexey didn't design Breakthru, he *could* have. Now we have the second in the series of Pajitnov-endorsed games, ClockWerx. Once again Spectrum Holobyte has created an action-oriented puzzle game that so closely mirrors Pajitnov's game aesthetics that we'd never know he didn't create it himself if they hadn't told us.

ClockWerx is one of those games that falls into the "minutes to learn, impossible to master" category. You control a clock hand as it revolves around a dot on screen. Each of the 100 screens is a puzzle made up of dots (and other things, but we'll get to them later). Your goal is to move from dot to dot, collecting bonus dots by landing on them, and finally to reach the exit dot. It's a very simple premise, and the control scheme has only one button more than Space Invaders. So why is it so addictive? And why so challenging?

If ClockWerx was as simple as jumping from dot to dot it would only be interesting for about two minutes. Naturally, there's a little more to it than that. As you make your way through the game, you'll discover a wide variety of obstacles to overcome. When put together skillfully (and there's nothing about ClockWerx that isn't skillful) these create some very crafty puzzles. The first danger you'll face is enemy clock hands. These menaces can spin in place, or they can follow a trail of like-colored dots in a fixed pattern. You'll also face walls which restrict your movement; to help you deal with the walls, you'll sometimes find explosives to set off, but touching a fuse once it's lit (and a fuse can snake its way around a whole screen) is deadly. Then there's spikes, mines which kill on contact; most of them are stationary, but some of them move about in patterns. Eventually you'll come across doors which must be opened by swinging across color-coded switch plates. None of these dangers is all that formidable alone, but the level designers have done a terrific job of combining them into compelling puzzles. For example, try dealing with a door controlled by two separate switch plates which are triggered by two separate enemy hands, while a third enemy hand flips back and forth in front of the entryway.

Most puzzle games try to gradually increase difficulty as you play, but few manage to pull this off very well. ClockWerx does. The levels are grouped into thematic areas of ten. The first ten are designed as a tutorial, presenting the obstacles one at a time to let you become familiar with them. After the tutorial is finished, the puzzles get harder, but at a very gradual pace. That's part of why ClockWerx is so addictive – because even a great fool can sit down at it and get some feeling of accomplishment. But don't let that make you think ClockWerx is a novice level game. Hardened puzzle gamers will still find ClockWerx to be a wonderfully challenging game, especially at the higher levels of difficulty where the speed of the game is dramatically increased. Also, the puzzles of ClockWerx don't have one winning route. Each puzzle can be completed in many ways, but there's always a path of least resistance. Or at least of lesser resistance.

With ClockWerx, Spectrum Holobyte continues to prove that they don't need to rely on Alexey Pajitnov to create their puzzle games for them, although he's still invaluable as a guiding influence. ClockWerx is a fantastic puzzle game, the best one I've seen in a very long time, maybe even since Tetris itself. If you're a fan of the Tetris line, ClockWerx is a game you simply *must* play. They just don't get any better than this.