



FEATURED REVIEW:

SwordThrust

by Forrest Johnson

Recipe for an excellent computer game: Start with an adventure/dialog program — you Open Box, Get Sword, Attack Monster, and so on. Add some features of an FRP game. You have a “character” with “characteristics.” He can get tired and rest, or be wounded and then healed. The *piece de resistance* — your character is reusable. He can be transferred from adventure to adventure, read directly from one disk to another, complete with equipment, gold and experience.

This is SWORDTHRUST, the creation of Donald Brown. His name is familiar to those who have played *Eamon*. But SWORDTHRUST is a commercial effort, and is more complete than the earlier game.

The System

Much of SWORDTHRUST will seem familiar to FRP gamers. When you boot the master disk to create your first character, you see three characteristics — “hardiness” (read ST), “agility” (read DX) and “charisma” (read charisma). These will range from 1 to 30. Charisma is the most important of the three. In this game, the greatest hero is he who makes his enemy his friend.

Your character starts with 200 g.p. and can buy any of five kinds of weapons, three kinds of armor, and two kinds of shields. Ten magic spells are available; most are too expensive for beginning characters. One can also visit a tavern and pick up rumors, can buy some training, or leave his money at the bank.

Each weapon has a base chance to hit, and deals a variable amount of damage (a sword does 1d8, a mace 1d4). Shields and armor absorb damage, but reduce your chance to hit. Neither shield nor armor can absorb damage indefinitely, but it’s hard to tell how much punishment one will take.

Each weapon, and spell, counts as a skill to be learned separately. There are also skills for parrying, using a weapon left-handed and wearing armor without DX penalty. Successful use of a skill may improve your level of ability.

Combat is straightforward. Fight or flee is your main option. However, you can also throw a spell, pick up a dropped weapon, or simply rest a turn.

Charisma

I learned the hard way that good charisma is vital for SWORDTHRUST characters. No matter how mighty a swordsman, an adventurer won’t get far without friends.

Monsters are either (1) hostile and attack you, (2) neutral and ignore you, or (3) friendly and follow you around, attacking hostile monsters. A character with high enough charisma can recruit a small army at no expense.

Of course, this is factored into the adventures. Some monsters are friendlier than others, and many of the hostile ones can only be defeated by a small army.

This seems like a design flaw. My character, Tuan, with CHA 24 and a charm spell, doesn’t get to fight much anymore.

Of course, “friends” are no help in figuring out a puzzle adventure, and they do require some upkeep — healing spells and sometimes a gift of weapons. Also, your small army disappears at the end of each adventure, and you must start the next one alone. But there are a lot of peculiar effects:

In one adventure, described below, Tuan made friends with a vampire. It watched amiably while Tuan looted its treasury, and as he made “friends” of Arthur Godalming and Mina Harker. (Don’t ask.) It helped kill a number of monsters which weren’t impressed with Tuan’s charisma, and watched while Tuan took their treasure for himself. Later Tuan, with his “friends” present, was told he would have to kill the vampire to complete his quest. This did not seem to alarm the vampire at all. However, when Tuan gave it a gold coin, it became furious and attacked him. (It was pounded flat.)

This weirdness is explained in the rules, but I think the programmer could have handled things better. I have never met anyone who let me have his bank account simply because he liked my boyish good looks. These “friends” should demand wages or a share of the loot.

Weak Points

There are a number of flaws. The absence of graphics will bother some people. (But not me; how much “graphics” do you get with D&D?)

You have to bargain every time you buy something. Bargaining can be dull. I’d rather be adventuring.

The encumbrance rules are a bit silly. How come a guy with three suits of armor and six weapons is “lightly encumbered?” (On the other hand, how many players really want to worry about encumbrance?)

Lastly, there are a number of errors in the otherwise commendable documentation.

Strategy

This is not a complicated game, but it does take some strategy. Most of it is obvious, but there are some tricks the designer may not have considered.

My central strategy is, I *don't play* unless I have a decent character. It may be possible to make your way in the world with CHA 4, but I wouldn't want to try. There is a suicide routine to dispose of really weak characters, but I have sometimes found it profitable to reboot the program and take character generation from the beginning. (Incidentally, the programmer could have eliminated this "strategy" if he had opted for point allocation instead of conventional dice-rolling as a basis for character generation.)

I accept combat with discretion, avoiding a "fair fight" like the place of honor at a hanging. Who wants to be fair? If threatened by multiple opponents, I flee. Monsters pursue on a percentage basis, but "friends" always flee with you. Using this tactic, I can pick off monsters one at a time. (The programmer could have made things harder by having monsters move in a group, or giving "friends" a chance of fleeing in the wrong direction.)

I wring every possible advantage out of the program. For example, if you try to

move normally in a room with hostile monsters, the program tells you that you can't. This amounts to a "free" way to find out whether hostile monsters are present; the other methods are dangerous.

These "strategies" would never get past a DM, but they can be vital for a SWORDTHRUST adventure.

The Testing Ground

Included on the master disk is "The King's Testing Ground," an introductory dungeon. It has much the same flavor as the T&T solo adventures.

You may lose a few characters here at first, but soon you will be running them through blindfolded. It is just a way to build up your characters; it has no other function or theme.

There is a subroutine which excludes experienced characters from the testing ground.

The Vampyre Caves

The first "adventure supplement" released for SWORDTHRUST is a puzzle scenario. Your character has been victimized by a vampire. Unless he finds some way to remedy this lamentable condition, he probably will not survive the next sunrise. In other words, you solve the puzzle

or you die. This is not a nice, safe way to pick up experience.

"Sunrise" is a good touch. The computer displays the game time (not real time) with each update. At 6:00 a.m., the time is displayed in reverse, and your character starts weakening. This helps to keep you from dawdling.

Like any adventure, this one can "wear out." It takes generations of characters to solve the puzzle, and a real hero to get through at all. But given these prerequisites, it is childishly easy. There might be some challenge in getting through with a weak character, but I feel little urge to try.

SWORDTHRUST is not the best game of its type; it's the only. It has flaws, but so does every milestone.

More adventures are promised. I cannot think of any games I await more eagerly.

SWORDTHRUST (CE Software, 801 73rd St., Des Moines, IA 50312); \$29.95. 48K disk for the Apple, DOS 3.3. Game comes with 28-page, 5½" x 8½" booklet, bagged. One player; playing time 30-60 minutes. Adventure cannot be saved. (Surviving characters can.) Published 1981.

THE VAMPYRE CAVES (CE Software); \$24.95. 48K disk by Donald Brown for the Apple, DOS 3.3. One player; playing time 1-3 hours. Can be saved. Published 1981.

Designer's Notes

Currently, the most popular type of computer game is the "adventure" game. In it, the player directs the actions of a single character. The character picks up (and uses) various artifacts, slays monsters, and gathers gold. However, "adventure" falls far short of true FRPping, with combat-and-magic systems being laughably simple and inconsistent from one adventure to the next. It was my desire to write a game that came far closer to the mark. *SwordThrust* is what emerged, and I think I succeeded.

The feature that separates *SwordThrust* from most other games is that it automatically stores your character on the diskette between adventures. Most games have a character's life end when the adventure is finished, but a *SwordThrust* character will develop and grow from one adventure to the next.

A second nearly unique feature of *SwordThrust* is a complete and complex combat system (which is fully explained in the player's manual). All weapons are



divided into five classes (axe, bow, club, spear, and sword), and every player has a separate expertise level for each class. Successfully using a weapon in a class increases your experience IN THAT CLASS ONLY.

The newest "feature" that some adventure games have added is fancy high-resolution graphics. The game is supposedly much better if you actually see a dungeon, not merely have it described to you. It was a long and difficult decision, but I chose not to use any graphics in my adventure.

The first (though less important reason) for going with mere descriptions is that *SwordThrust* currently pushes at the edges of the Apple's limits. If I were to add pictures, I would have to remove some of the complexities of the game, and I was very unwilling to do that.

But, far more importantly, I have seen many of the graphics-based adventures, and none of them approaches even a medium-quality comic book, much less shows Frazetta-ish pictures. This is not the fault of the people who designed the games. The hardware available today simply cannot produce high-quality illustrations. Given the choice between vivid descriptions or bland illustrations, I chose the descriptions.

For now, that is. The *SwordThrust* products currently out were designed to give us a great deal of freedom in the future. We are experimenting with various different formats of games, including dungeons that can handle whole parties entering together, two-computer dungeons that pit two players against each other, fantasy wargames (where your character's gold equips your army), and even capabilities for designing your own adventures! With *SwordThrust*, we may finally have a universe that truly has no limits.

— Donald Brown