

review: **Loony Labyrinth**

by Richard Rouse III

Type: Pinball game

Publisher: Starplay Productions (303/447-9562)

Retail Price: \$79.95

Street Price: \$42.00

Requires: Any Macintosh with 13" or larger 256 Color monitor, 2.5 MB free RAM, 4 MB free Hard Drive space, System 6.07 or later.

Protection: None

here are a small handful of computer game developers without whom the selection of impressive games for the Macintosh would be reduced to almost nothing. Jason Jones, the creative force behind Minotaur, Pathways into Darkness, and Marathon is certainly one of the Macintosh game market saviors, Eric Parker (Hellcats, A-10 Attack) is another, and one would be remiss not to mention Rand and Robyn Miller of Myst fame. But one of the key developers in making Mac games that PC users drool over is Yoshikatsu Fujita of LittleWing Co. who, together with his artist/wife Reiko F. Nojima, has created the best computer pinball games ever made — first Eight Ball Deluxe, then Crystal Caliburn, and now Loony Labyrinth — and made them first and best for the Macintosh. No one can make computer pinball games like Fujita (as is apparent by the strange absence of Amtex pinball games for the Mac since Fujita left them — anyone care to wonder whatever happened to Fun House?) and it is through his extensive labors that computer pinball games, known as “vid pins,” have been raised to a level of unprecedented brilliance and artistry.

Loony Toons. The most recent game from this creative genius, Loony Labyrinth offers a terrific pinball game which involves a story somehow intertwined with Greek mythology and the story of the Minotaur. But nobody plays pinball for their plots but rather for their gameplay, and happily Loony Labyrinth excels here like only a LittleWing vid pin can. The extra-wide playfield is lovingly laid out to offer a very smooth and flowing game. The play of Loony is very modern indeed, with a nearly uncountable number of targets to knock down and various tasks to accomplish. The game offers three different ramps to shoot the ball up, three different ways to start a three-ball simultaneous multi-ball, not to mention that earning five “stones” enables you take a trip in the “Loony Machine,” a time-machine of sorts which will transport the player back to 2000 BC where gameplay changes all over

again. Here, Loony has more of a singular "purpose": to rescue the labyrinth hostages by shooting the left "Labyrinth" ramp nine times, and then defeat the minotaur by hitting the "Mino Chamber" five times in quick succession. Though the game claims that 2000 BC is meant to be a more straight-ahead pinball game, the number of multi-balls one can still achieve and the multitudinous ways to earn points still gives it a frantic modern-pinball feel.

The real test of a video pinball game's quality is how realistic the physics model is: how well does the game simulate earth gravity? This is where Fujita's games have always excelled as no other. Tristan, his first pinball game, which at the time(1990) was massively entertaining, in retrospect seems to have had little going for it besides the most realistic pinball physics model ever made. That same physics model, with noticeable improvements here and there, has been used in Fujita's three subsequent games, including, of course, Loony Labyrinth. The ball does seem to float rather than roll in some situations, but for the most part the simulation of gravity is extremely convincing. As for bugs, something that consistently astonishes is that there are absolutely none in Loony Labyrinth: nothing is technically wrong with this game. It never crashes the machine, it never quits mysteriously, and it never displays improper performance, all a testament to Fujita's brilliance as a Macintosh programmer.

[Looking Back.](#) It's hard to discuss Loony Labyrinth without relating it to LittleWing's previous games, a comparison to which it stands up quite well. Reiko Nojima's graphics in Loony are the best in any of the LittleWing games, slightly better than even the brilliant graphics found in Crystal Caliburn. Here, strange half-birds fly across the play area, with billowing clouds emanating from the bottom of the screen while a menacing minotaur looks down on the action from his "Mino Chamber." The ramps are rendered in a believable molded plastic texture, with words carefully bent around them describing their functionality. Everywhere on the playing field are lights which indicate any number of a multitude of different play-settings, each blinking on and off in gorgeous shading. To my tastes, what I see in Loony are near the best line-art graphics in any Macintosh game I've seen, second only to those found in Prince Persia.

o continue the comparison, the sounds and music in Loony Labyrinth are of a much more whimsical, playful manner than those in its predecessors. Lighting two targets will set off a surprising bird tweet, while the counting up of the bonus at the end of a ball ends with the crashing sound of a cash register. The music here is better than what was found in previous LittleWing games, with its tempo increasing and key altering ever-so-slightly for multi-ball play, causing the player's adrenaline to pump even faster. And most amazing of all is that Loony features an entirely different set of whimsical tunes to accompany play when the player ventures back to 2000 BC.

When I interviewed Fujita last year, he said that he was far from the best player of Crystal Caliburn, and that he was always astounded at the high scores players were able to achieve, using strategies he had never thought of. This is obviously the case with Loony Labyrinth as well, and proves to be the one failing of the game: for the experienced player, it is simply too easy, and, in turn, games are too lengthy.

For me, there seems to be a threshold to gameplay. I will average about a 10-minute game, with a final score of 10 to 30 million, and then out of the blue will have a great game, scoring 300-500 million and lasting an hour. This is usually accomplished by gaining multi-ball after multi-ball after multi-ball, to the point where the game is nearly perpetual. Since there are a total of four different ways to achieve a multi-ball, this is not so difficult to achieve.

In the introduction from the well-written, interesting manual, Fujita freely admits that he intended the game to be more for novice players, since many complained that Crystal Caliburn, which had only one way to achieve multi-ball, was too hard. What this means is that for expert players, especially those who have already mastered Crystal Caliburn, few games of Loony are played which don't reach a billion.

When I talked to Scott Mesch, President of Starplay Productions, the game's publisher, he said that the highest reported score to date was 11 billion and that the recipient had played

the game for a grueling 11 hours. Many pinball wizards have complained that the game leaves them worn out because of the unprecedented length of time it requires, citing that the end of a game leaves them more relieved than satisfied.

Luckily, Starplay has recognized the problem and promised to make a patch available (probably available by the time you read this) which will make the game harder by limiting the number of extra balls a player can receive. Unfortunately, this reviewer doesn't think that reducing the number of extra balls will solve the situation, and that the numerous ways of receiving multi-balls is the true problem with the game which causes overlong play for pinball masters.

At the same time, what expert players may see as a weakness in Loony Labyrinth is a strength for many computer game lovers who often shy away from pinball games because of their sheer difficulty and unfriendliness to the novice player. Loony will provide an excellent starting place for people who don't usually play pinball, and by creating such a game Fujita has done a service to the entire pinball industry. Loony has the potential to bring a whole new slew of fans to pinball and computer pinball in particular, players who will cut their teeth on this game and move on to the harder challenge of games such as Crystal Caliburn and Eight Ball Deluxe later.

With the aforementioned three vid pins, LittleWing has created three brilliant games, each filling a different niche than the other: Loony provides a great introductory-level modern game, Crystal a brilliant expert-level modern game, and finally both are complemented by Eight Ball, a classically styled game which will woo the hardened pinball fanatic who usually shies away from "vid pins."

Many snooty computer game fans consider themselves above the likes of a measly pinball game, arguing that succeeding at them requires mostly luck. On the other hand many Pinball aficionados scoff at computer games, pointing to their predictability and inherent "fakeness": pinball games offer not simulated gravity, but rather the genuine article. This puts video pinball games in an awkward position of alienating both camps.

Still the Best. Luckily, LittleWing's Loony Labyrinth is a great video pinball game, one of the best ever made (along with Fujita's two previous masterpieces), and combines some of the bells and whistles that computer game fans seem to love along with a carefully simulated reality sure to please all but the most hardened pinball junkie. Were it not for the fact that the game is too easy for experts, I could not help but classify Loony Labyrinth as not only one of the best vid pins ever but one of greatest Macintosh games of all time.

Pros

- Absolutely no bugs
- Great for those usually intimidated by Pinball games
- Smooth, flowing gameplay
- Flawless graphics
- Wonderful music and sound effects

Cons

- The game is too easy, causing games last too long for expert players