



It was New Year's Eve, 1989 and Ryan and I had done something recently that had gotten us into trouble. I don't remember what that was, but I do remember that we were both limited to one hour of NES time a day, even during the Christmas holiday. That well and truly sucked, as all of us, including Sharon, had each gotten new games for Christmas that year: Ryan had gotten *Bubble Bobble*; Sharon, *Double Dragon*; and I *Castlevania II: Simon's Quest*. Sharon wasn't being punished, so she was free to play *Double Dragon* for however long she wanted. At least she had her own NES to use and wasn't hogging ours.

So New Year's Eve had arrived. We were less than six hours away from the start of the '90s at this point, and I was just starting my hour on the NES. Having played nothing but *Simon's Quest* since Christmas, I decided that I wanted a change tonight. I wanted to play the game that had started it all: *Castlevania*. It had been four months since I had received the game as a gift, and I was stuck on the boss of stage four, Frankenstein's Monster. That little prick Igor always managed to kill me, and no matter what I did, I couldn't beat him. So I fired up the game and blew through the first three stages. I got up to stage four, and made it to the Monster. As usual, I died, but I kept going.

Wonder of wonders, on my next life I actually managed to defeat him. I had only seen the next stage the one time I had watched Braunle play through the game, but I knew who awaited me. The Grim Reaper himself: Death.

If I could make it to him.

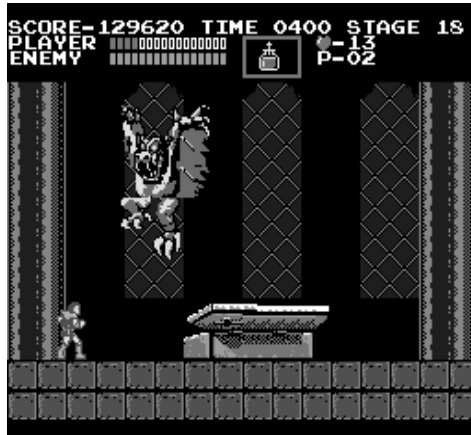
It took a couple of lives, but I did it—and I defeated him on my first try. By then, my hour was just about up. This was not good. Here I was, standing at the beginning of stage six, Dracula's stage, for the first time ever. I couldn't quit now. So I paused the game and went to go talk to Mom. I explained the situation to her—but just as I felt I was making some headway with her, Ryan chimed in, saying that he hadn't had his hour yet. Damn it. Determined to get back to my game, I said that I would forfeit the hour I was going to get tomorrow and give it to Ryan, if I could just play the game until I finished it. I was that close, I said.

Ryan liked the idea, and after a couple of minutes of deliberation, Mom agreed to my proposal. Then they both went to go watch *Batman* (the Tim Burton

film that had just recently been released on video) with Dad, and I went back into the bedroom, determined to beat the game.

I fought my way through stage six, knowing that if I could just make it to Dracula's tower I'd be able to continue from that spot no matter how many times I died. It took a while, but I finally made it there. The hours had passed, and it was now close to nine o'clock. So from that point, I began the long battle against Dracula. I used every trick that I knew of, every one that Braunle had shown me and every one that I had read about.

Despite all of my knowledge, I failed miserably. Time after time I continued, trying to find my own groove, a pattern that would work for me. I was finally starting to make some headway. I could now get his first form down to the last few bars of energy, and once or twice I made it to his second form. Hours passed, and eventually I slapped on my headphones to keep the level theme from grinding on my ears.



*Me, around continue nineteen or so, about to die. Again.*

Finally around my thirtieth continue or so, I managed to get him to his demonic second form, and I was doing a good job of beating on him. However, he had hit me three times, and I could feel that any second he would land that fourth, fatal hit. The battle had taken its toll on him as well; he was down to his last two bars of energy, but he was approaching fast, and I was almost out of hearts.

In a last ditch attempt to save myself, I jumped and threw a boomerang at his head while frantically whipping him. Just as he was about to spew his flames of death at me, my boomerang came back, nailing him in the head and eliminating his last sliver of energy. Dracula erupted into a mass of small fires, then a red crystal appeared in his place and fell to the floor.

It was over. I had done it. I threw off the headphones, grabbed the crystal and let out a victory yell. *Castlevania* had finally fallen before me, and I settled back to watch the ending play out. As the final ending screen vanished and the

game started over, I reached up and turned off the power, a satisfied grin on my face. I then went out to the kitchen to get a drink.

As I stood there downing my victory Coke, I heard the sounds of a countdown coming from the television in the living room, ending with a deafening "HAPPY NEW YEAR!" I glanced at the clock on the microwave. Sure enough, it was midnight and the '80s were officially history. Then it dawned on me: the last thing I did before the end of the decade was finish *Castlevania*. That was something worth commemorating.

I tried to finish *Castlevania* every New Year's Eve Day to commemorate that historical event in my career as a gamer. The only anniversaries I missed were the tenth and the fifteenth, and those were because of circumstances beyond my control. By the time the twentieth anniversary rolled around in 2009, I made sure I was prepared. I had also decided that this would be the last time I would make my anniversary playthrough. I figured that after twenty years, it was finally time to stop.

I started early, simply because I didn't want to let any distractions take me away from my goal. I got the attention of my children, who had never seen me play through the game before. They sat down and watched as I began to play. As I fought my way through the stages, I was peppered with questions about the game, which I did my best to answer while simultaneously trying to concentrate on playing—not the easiest of tasks, I can tell you that.

Finally, at 10:36 A.M., as snow was beginning to fall outside, Dracula fell before my whip. The castle crumbled and the credits rolled. My oldest daughter, Leona, was frantically trying to decide whether to look at the falling snow or the ending of the game. Ultimately, the ending won out. I smiled as my kids gathered around me and I read the final message in the credits out loud:

*"You played the greatest role in this story. Thank you for playing."*

No, thank you, Konami, for providing me with over twenty years of enjoyment and memories.

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*Written by Rob Strangman. This excerpt from the book *Memoirs of a Virtual Caveman* is © 2008, 2014 SCAR Productions. Please do not distribute without the author's permission. Direct all inquiries to Rob at [gradiusone@yahoo.com](mailto:gradiusone@yahoo.com)*

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