The Oregon Trail handheld game is a really fun nostalgia gadget

In late February, quietly began selling a portable version of *The Oregon Trail* for $24.99. Now, I've spent $25 on much dumber things than this in my time. You probably have, too. So I went right out to my local store and bought the handheld game once it was in stock. (Initially it was only available in stores, .) Target is the exclusive retailer, and it also sells , though can't imagine that would scratch my nostalgia itch to the same satisfying degree as this miniature Apple II gadget.

Target and Big Fun, the actual manufacturer of this handheld, definitely get points for presentation. The beige unit is chunky but light and comfortable to hold. And for something that costs $24.99, the color screen on here is about all you could ask for. The protruding floppy disk is the game's power button, and there's also a speaker to its right that barks out eight-bit audio just fine. The rest of the layout is pretty simple, with buttons for enter, yes / no, volume, and a wagon key that you'll use whenever you want to stop to rest, hunt, trade, or learn about each historical stop along the way.





The screen is about all you could ask for from a cheap handheld.
Photo by Chris Welch / The Verge

To the best of my recollection, I haven't played *The Oregon Trail* since leaving elementary school. I haven't tried any ROMs, online versions, or the recent remake inside of *Minecraft*, which looks fun for a new generation of gamers. Also, my memory is nowhere near good enough to know precisely *which* Oregon Trail this really is; the consensus seems to be that it's closer to the MS-DOS version than the Apple II, since you're able to freely walk around while hunting.



I’m sorry. I’ve got people to feed.
Photo by Chris Welch / The Verge

But as I pressed the big, loose-feeling buttons on this chunky plastic handheld and made mission-critical decisions, I felt the familiar pressures of looking after everyone in my group and the helplessness of seeing a random pop-up alert that someone had broken a limb or come down with cholera.

Just kidding. This is *The Oregon Trail* we’re talking about. If someone making the trek with you doesn’t die of dysentery, you’re not getting the full experience. I do still get unreasonably sad when oxen die; that hasn’t changed. And my girlfriend wasn’t thrilled when her character unexpectedly croaked after a single bout of exhaustion. Some folks just aren’t cut out for this journey.



This is still the most stressful part of the game.
Photo by Chris Welch / The Verge

But everyone else in my wagon made the trek successfully on the first attempt. I guess I made the right call in picking the banker — even if said banker is totally worthless at repairing anything on the wagon. The carpenter might be a better fixer-upper, but I'll take the money for food and supplies every time.

Having to get your wagon across a body of water remains the most harrowing aspect of the game. You've got little control over the diseases that randomly bring sickness and death to your squad, but many of your other choices matter, and you've got to constantly monitor your remaining food, clothing, and other supplies.

I don't know why I'm telling you about *The Oregon Trail*'s gameplay mechanics. If you're reading this review, you've probably got a good idea of how it goes.



The D-pad is a monstrosity, but it gets the job done.
Photo by Amelia Holowaty Krales / The Verge

But I can definitely say that this handheld version is plenty enjoyable. I'm happy with what I got for $25. Will I be playing *The Oregon Trail* every day? Or carrying it around in my bag instead of my Switch? No chance. But that's not why I bought it. It's a fun nostalgia gadget for 30-somethings like myself. It'd make a good, silly gift. Everything feels authentic and true — true *enough*, anyway — to the experience I had in grade school crowded around a computer with my classmates.

And hey, the batteries come included.



Photo by Amelia Holowaty Krales / The Verge

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