Joseph Barnett
STS145: The History of Computer Game Design – Professor Henry Lowood
Game Review

Mega Man II

Mega Man II was published in July of 1989 by Capcom U.S.A. for the Nintendo Entertainment System (NES). Programmed by H. M. D. and designed by a team of Capcom employees lead by A. K.,[1] Mega Man II was the second game in a long series, and its story continued where the original Mega Man's left off. In the first game, Dr. Light and Dr. Wily are scientists who invent amazing creations and robots to simplify the lives of humans. Dr. Wily, however, decided to try to take over the world, and reprogrammed the original seven robots that they created. Mega Man, one of these robots, was able to resist the reprogramming, and was sent by Dr. Light to fight against and defeat Dr. Wily and his six robot henchmen.[2]

Mega Man II takes place after Mega Man's victory in the original game. The year is now 200X, and Dr. Wily has returned. This time, he has created eight of his own evil robots to defeat Mega Man. Again, Mega Man must defeat each of Wily's robots before he is able to enter Dr. Wily's castle in order to confront the villain. As the game begins, the player is given a choice of which evil robot Mega Man should try to defeat first. Like every installment of the Mega Man series on the NES, Mega Man can confront the robots in any order he desires. Since he receives the special weapon of the robot he defeats, however, some sequences are considerably more challenging than others. This becomes especially true in Mega Man II, since defeating some

robots also grants Mega Man the ability to use "Items," which are platforms that allow Mega Man to reach areas he would not ordinarily be able to. Gameplay consists of Mega Man navigating through a series of levels that end in a room where he fights one of Dr. Wily's robots.

Each level is themed after the robot that inhabits it: for example, Heat Man's stage is filled with fiery enemies and lava, Wood Man's stage is a large forest filled with animal like robots, and Bubble Man's stage takes place under water, inhabited by fish and other sea-dwelling creature-like robots To combat enemies in each level, Mega Man starts the game armed with his trusty Arm Cannon, and can perform two basic actions: fire and jump. As Mega Man builds an arsenal, the "fire" action can be set to perform a variety of tasks. With the Metal Blade, Mega Man can fire projectiles in eight different directions; the Leaf Shield surrounds Mega Man and protects him from enemy attacks as long as he remains still. Switching weapons is as easy as pausing the game, selecting the desired weapon, and resuming play. Through this multiple weapon system, the game's designers were able to add functionality to Mega Man's character without requiring the player to perform complex button combinations.

Mega Man II is a wonderful example of simple gameplay combining with the intricacy and depth of level design to facilitate a successful video game experience. Without changing the gameplay from the original Mega Man, Capcom was able to develop a new, even more successful game due to the quality and variety of levels provided in Mega Man II. From navigating the slick ice of Flash Man's stage to dealing with conveyor-belt floors in Metal Man's stage to falling through the laser beam infested, vertical corridors of Quick Man's stage to trying not to plummet into oblivion in the atmosphere of Air Man's stage, each stage offers a different set of puzzles and styles of play. Stages consisted of either horizontal one screen tall corridors, vertical one screen wide corridors, or series of both. Within these corridors, game designers planted a variety of

obstacles to stop Mega Man from advancing. Ladders, gap jumps, disappearing floors, laser

beams, spikes and depth charges impede Mega Man's progress while enemy robots do all they can

to destroy the "Blue Bomber."

The stage select screen: Player can choose any of eight levels to start from.

This game also incorporates great depth and replayability in that there are multiple ways

to pass almost every obstacle in the game. As previously mentioned, the eight robot levels can be

traversed in any order desired, creating a multitude of different linear paths to complete the game

through. Furthermore, while each robot boss has a preprogrammed weakness, Mega Man can

defeat any boss with his standard Arm Cannon, or with other weapons that may not inflict as

much damage as the recommended weapon. This, combined with the game's two difficulty

settings, allow a player to challenge himself as much as he wants, and enhances replayability by

leaving room for the player to play the game again at a higher difficulty level, or even at the same

difficulty level, but in a different order.

Technologically, Mega Man II seems very similar to the original Mega Man. The major

improvement in game engine design is the addition of a password system, which allowed a player

to turn off the NES, come back later, and continue where he left off. At first glance, graphics appear to be identical in quality to the first game, but upon closer inspection, the power-up items are drawn with better resolution, as are many of the enemies in the game. In fact, Mega Man II was one of the first games to feature sprites that took up more than half of the visible screen, as boss robots in Dr. Wily's castle such as the Green Dragon and the Gutsdozer were some of the more intimidating enemies seen on the NES platform. Because of developments like these, Nintendo Power magazine awarded Mega Man II with the "Best Graphics" award the year it came out. The size and detail of these characters were made possible through more efficient programming, as the screens they appeared on were mostly black, in addition to the fact that memory had become cheaper, and it was feasible to fit more memory in a game cartridge. The availability of more memory led to another improvement over the original Mega Man game, as well. Instead of just six levels, Mega Man II contains eight levels, which are longer on average than the levels in the first game, thereby providing even more depth of play.
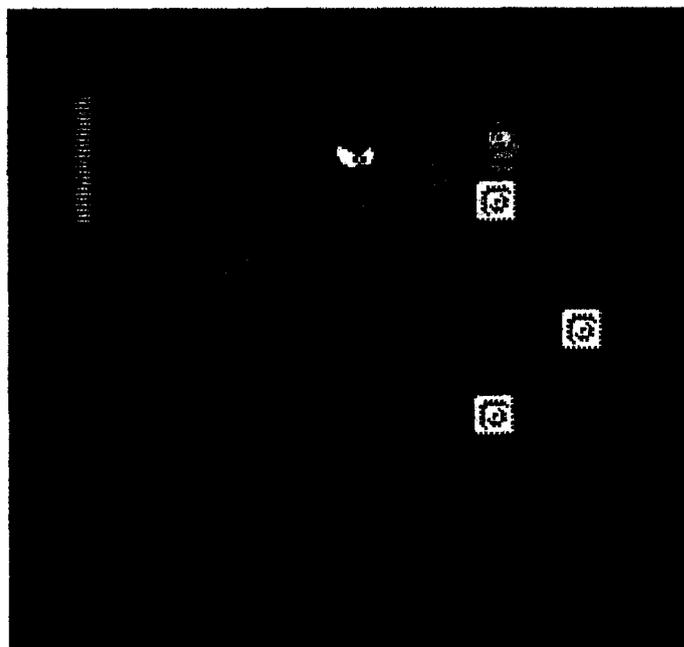
Mega Man fighting the Green Dragon equipped with the Quick Boomerang

Mega Man II also typified some of the artificial intelligence techniques that dominated games on the NES. Ordinary enemies that inhabited stages would follow a very basic pattern, usually moving in the opposing direction of Mega Man, paying little if any attention to his existence. If they happened to run into our hero or fire a projectile that contacts him, he receives damage, but almost none of the smaller robots change their behavior based upon Mega Man's position. Challenge, then, is created by the quantity of enemies on the screen at one time, rather than the intelligent behavior of these renegade robots. Once Mega Man reaches the final boss of a level, however, some degree of artificial intelligence is incorporated. Each robot boss follows a different pattern, dodging and weaving to avoid Mega Man's attacks while firing directly at him. Due to the limitations of the NES's 8–bit processor, it wasimpractical to extend the artificial intelligence to incorporate ordinary drone enemies, and in most NES games, as in Mega Man II, artificial intelligence was saved for the climactic portions of gameplay, such as the battle against a boss robot.

One of the greatest aspects of Mega Man II, however, is the soundtrack. The score intricately designed to fit in with the action/adventure style of gameplay. From the falsely tranquil tune of the underwater Bubble Man stage to the fast paced beats of Quick Man's stage to the ominous silence of the innermost area of Dr. Wily's castle, the music is perfectly tailored to each stage. The personal favorite tune of many, however, is the music that accompanies the icy labyrinth of Flash Man's lair. This particular piece amazingly upbeat and catchy; a number of children have been known to make up lyrics to the song and sing them as they play through the level. Veterans of Mega Man have commented that the Flash Man theme is even danceable, and there are numerous techno re–mixes of the tune floating around the internet[3]

While not an immensely groundbreaking game in terms of originality, Mega Man II was able to fine tune the formula initiated in the first Mega Man to create an immensely popular game. As the first of many sequels, Mega Man II began the explosion of a series that now numbers well over twenty different titles. Mega Man II, however, remains special among these twenty, as it retained the simplicity of the original game while adding and perfecting many features of the game that made it that much more popular and enjoyable. Mega Man II also marked the beginning of the practice of building a successful series of sequels upon the same basic gameplay concept that pervades the gaming industry today.

1. Staff names/initials taken from game's end credits. Complete listing of credits is as follows:
  Metal Man – Masanori Satou
  Air Man – YoujiKanazawa
  Bubble Man – Takashi Tanaka
  Crash Man – Akira Yoshida
  Flash Man – Tomoo Yamaguchi
  Quick Man – Hirofumi Mizoguchi
  Heat Man – Toshiyuki Kataoka
  Wood Man –Masakatsu Ichikawa
  Character Design –
      Yasukichi
      Inafking
      Tom Pon
      Nagineko
      A.K.
  Sound Programmers –
      Ogeretsu Kun
      Manami Ietel
      Yuuki–char's Papa
  Programmer – H.M.D.
  Planner – A.K.
2. All information about the original Mega Man game taken from FAQs and Walkthroughs available at http://www.gamefaqs.com/console/nes/game/7926.html
3. The original Flash Man theme can be found at http://sweeze.stanford.edu/Mega_Man_II_–_Flash_Man.mp3, and one example of a techno remix can be found at http://remix.overclocked.org/Megaman2_FlashFire_OC_ReMix.mp3