Mortal Kombat: Flawless Victory?

        Back in 1992, I was a prepubescent pre-teenager whose life revolved around
sporadic trips to the local arcades and at-home mastery of whatever Nintendo
games I could get my hands on. I stuck mainly with fighting games, because
those were the ones that earned a player a local sense of fame and recognition
within the arcade culture. At the time, I was becoming bored with the most
popular game, Street Fighter 2, and my stints at the arcade were becoming less
and less frequent. But along came a game that ushered us back into the local
arcade and changed the entire community there. Many players, including myself,
were content to simply watch this game for hours. Weíd pop quarters in every
now and then to take a stab at it ourselves, but the real fun came from watching
others play and simply taking in the scene. Without giving too much of this
paper away, the game was Mortal Kombat. It was created by Midway Games and
strengthened the booming arcade business at the time. Fast-forward to the
present and this recent press release from March 6th, 2001 (HYPERLINK
http://biz.yahoo.com/bw/010306/2576.html
  http://biz.yahoo.com/bw/010306/2576.html):

Midway Games Inc., a leading interactive entertainment software company, today
announced that it has reduced its coin-operated video game work force by
approximately 60 employees (about 8% of the company's total employee base) in an
effort to cut overhead costs in light of current coin-op industry conditions.
Midway Games Inc. is actively seeking additional employees for its home video
game business.

What happened between these two moments in time is a string of video game
sequels, two movies, a TV show, and a ton of other merchandising surrounding the
Mortal Kombat universe. From the games I have mastered and the dirt Iíve
uncovered, it was a developing joyride, a hectic progression influenced by
specific factors of technology, culture, and business.
        The Mortal Kombat design team was comprised of four important members: Ed
Boon, John Tobias, Dan Forden, and John Vogel. These four have controlled
production of all games published in the Mortal Kombat universe. Tobias and
Boon were the co-creators of Mortal Kombat. They were the brains behind the
story, the characters, the meat of the games. Forden was in charge of music and
sound, while Vogel focused on backgrounds. Their personalities come out through
interviews and especially through subtle tidbits hidden throughout the games.
For example, as a gag, Tobias and Boon turned their names around to create Noob
Saibot, a secret character hidden in Mortal Kombat 2 who later became a playable
part of the storyline. As for Forden, his flashy sense of humor can also be
seen in Mortal Kombat 2. Sometimes, when an uppercut is landed on your opponent
(a devastating blow in Mortal Kombat), his image pokes out of the bottom right
corner of the screen and shouts ìToasty!î in a high-pitched taunt. Furthermore,
from 2 recent interviews (HYPERLINK http://mk.hotweird.com/features/logs/09-
14-2000.txt   http://mk.hotweird.com/features/logs/09-14-2000.txt and
HYPERLINK http://mk.hotweird.com/features/logs/09-16-1999.log
  http://mk.hotweird.com/features/logs/09-16-1999.log) it is clear that all
four of these men are young and hip, and they love mastering video games as much
as they enjoy making them. Unfortunately, John Tobias, along with several other
Midway employees, recently left in August of 1999. The game he was completing,
which was connected to the Mortal Kombat universe, was finished and released.
No other Mortal Kombat games have been released since his departure, so only
time will tell as to its impact. Right now, the developers are returning to the
next Mortal Kombat sequel after taking a short break from the series, a relaxing
move that is understandable considering the history of what theyíve created.

It all started with the original Mortal Kombat. On some levels it followed the standard model for fighting games. First, it felt obligated to have a crude storyline so that you learned something interesting when you won. In this case, a four-armed monster (Goro) and a sorcerer named Shang Tsung were about to win the Mortal Kombat tournament for the tenth consecutive time, thus dooming the earth. Players must save the day by controlling one of seven fighters, each with their own personal reasons for competing in the tournament. Second, you compete against either the computer or another human with the goal of beating the snot out of them. Specific motions with the joystick allow for special moves that do more damage to the opponent. Third, games are divided into rounds, and the first to capture two of these rounds is the winner. Winners get to continue playing until they lose.

However, subtle deviations from this mold transformed Mortal Kombat into a blockbuster. On the technology side, it strayed from cartoons and polygons by using real actors. The movements of the actors were caught on camera and digitized to give the game a tremendous sense of realism. As for culturally-driven changes, Tobias and Boon recognized the violence that existed in American television, movies, and on the streets. They utilized this aspect to create the defining elements in Mortal Kombat games: blood, fatalities, and more blood. Spouts of blood fly with every spear that hits, every punch that lands, and especially after a player has won two rounds. At that point, the words ìFinish Himî flash across the screen, accompanied by the announcerís tough and heartless pronunciation. The victor has several seconds to perform a very specific set of movements that, if accomplished, murder the opponent in a rush of gore. For instance, Sub-Zero had one of the most popular fatalities. He would walk up to the stunned opponent, grab their hair, and sever their head from their body. He would then turn to face his human audience, lifting the severed head as a trophy, revealing the dangling spinal cord that was still attached.

Understanding that play control and fighting technique were not the big pull for their game, the developers didnít waste too much time perfecting these elements. They further broke the mold by using a specific button to block rather than holding the joystick away from the opponent, but players didnít really care. They wanted to see blood, watch fatalities, and learn how to perform fatalities. The developers never predicted their creation would be so popular, a surprise that caught them up in elements of design that they had never experienced before.

The first problems that arose connected both business and culture. Due to its arcade success, it was an easy business decision to port Mortal Kombat to console systems, the important ones at the time being the Super Nintendo and the Sega Genesis. Parents and the media didnít appreciate the violence that filled Mortal Kombat, and they were outraged that it would now be invading their homes. Nintendo responded by transforming the blood into white sweat and toning down the fatalities. Sega made blood and gore available through a code in its version. Not surprisingly, the Genesis sold millions more copies. Nintendo learned its lesson and never tried to pull any censoring stunts like that again. The developers took these attacks and successes in stride, adapting them into another blockbuster: Mortal Kombat 2.

Technology didnít play a major role in the transition from Mortal Kombat to Mortal Kombat 2. The graphics and sound increased minimally, but no major changes were made to the look and feel of the game.

Culture and business, on the other hand, shaped the evolution of Mortal Kombat 2. Primarily, more characters, more secrets, and a larger storyline were added to immerse more players in the series and open the door for several possible sequels. It was revealed that Shang Tsung (the evil sorcerer from the original) was actually second in command behind Shao Kahn. This made Shang Tsung playable, along with six other new characters, and tied directly to the key difference between Mortal Kombat and Mortal Kombat 2: the blood and

fatalities were increased to appeal to players, while the violence was made less realistic to soothe parents and the media. The first place this is evident is in the new characters. The majority of them are non-human. They are still portrayed by actors, but make-up and effects make them seem more fantastic. Also, the backgrounds are less gritty and realistic. They are excessive and colorful, with pits of slime, trees with faces, and incredible creatures moving around. The storyline explains this by claiming that the combatants are now fighting in Shao Kahnís realm (Outworld). In addition, the blood flows more profusely than ever, and characters have at least two fatalities, as opposed to one in Mortal Kombat, as well as several stage fatalities. Strangely enough, babalities and friendships can also be performed in place of a fatality. Babalities turn your opponent into a baby, while friendships enact comical events like Shang Tsung creating a rainbow or Johnny Cage signing an autograph. Since these routines involve not using a punch button during the round you are victorious, some see them as an embarrassing taunt, but they are more than that. One of the major Freudian defense mechanisms for dealing with disturbing incidents is to turn them into a joke. Thatís exactly what the babalities and friendships do. They make light of the violence and in a subtle way make Mortal Kombat 2 more acceptable in society.

Gamers took immediately to Mortal Kombat 2, and it was ported intact to the Super Nintendo and Sega Genesis. To this day, many (including myself) consider it the best game in the series. Unfortunately, that acclaim only got the developers into trouble.

Greedy business led to failure of the third installment in the Mortal Kombat saga. The storyline and new characters exploded to draw in players. The blood and fatalities increased, adding animalities to the recipe. Animalities turned your character into an animal that somehow mauled the opponent. But the animal animations were rushed, discolored, and hand-drawn. They were more fantasy for parents, but too fantastic for players. Also, a contemporary blockbuster fighting game called Killer Instinct had used large combos (unblockable combinations of hits) to suck in players. From a business standpoint, this seemed like a feature that was necessary in Mortal Kombat 3, so a Run button and simple combos became a major part of the play control. This wreaked havoc, especially for players who missed the simplicity of the original and the realism of its fatalities.

Due to the failure of Mortal Kombat 3, business strategy pushed the developers into two spin-offs: Ultimate Mortal Kombat 3 and Mortal Kombat Trilogy. Ultimate Mortal Kombat 3 added a few more characters, a little more story, multiplayer game modes (2 vs. 2 and tournament), and a combo meter. All in all, the improvements were quick, minor, and directed at drawing those players who had spurned Mortal Kombat 3 back into the series. Mortal Kombat Trilogy was an attempt to combine all of the previous games to exploit the new power of next-generation console systems like Playstation and Nintendo 64. The only major addition was brutalities. Brutalities were ripped off from Killer Instinctís ultimate combos, where you would simply beat your opponent to death. Mortal Kombat Trilogy was not released in arcades and was not received very well (HYPERLINK http://mk.hotweird.com/oldnews/oldnews.cgi?month=12&year=1996 http://mk.hotweird.com/oldnews/oldnews.cgi?month=12&year=1996):

What's the deal with Mortal Kombat Trilogy? Let's look at the Playstation version. I went shopping and saw 20 copies of MKT and there was like only 3 or 4 of every other game. Did Williams make too many, or is it just because this type of Mortal Kombat has been juiced to the max? Now let's look at the Nintendo64 version. I went to the N64 section of the video games department and there was absolutely NOTHING left to buy for the Nintendo64. From games to accessories nothing was in stock, except 16 copies of Mortal Kombat Trilogy. Jeez, I mean when a RF converter outsells a game, that's gotta hurt. I know that it's not

fair to compare a game to a RF converter, or that it could be that parents don't want their kids to play Mortal Kombat, or it could be the excellent distribution of Williams, but come on, it's been like this for more than a month. I know that many people will disagree when I say: MK3, UMK3, MKT, what's the big difference? Absolutely NOTHING! You may say MKT and UMK3 have more characters, but does that really change the game? It still plays the same, looks the same, and sucks the same. MK3 was nice for the first 4 months, but why does Midway have to milk this product for 3 years? It's the same crap packaged with new features to make you pay more money for the same game. -- This is my opinion.

Luckily, innovation and technology came along to save the day.
    Mortal Kombat Mythologies: Sub-Zero filled the gap after Mortal Kombat Trilogy in an interesting way. It was Mortal Kombat play control crossed with a side-scrolling RPG adventure, necessitating a direct port to consoles. It expanded the storyline of the Mortal Kombat universe in preparation for the next installment, thus drawing in more fans. It also gave the developers, not all of whom worked on the project, a breath of peace and quiet before the storm of technology swept them away.
    Mortal Kombat 4 was driven out of the realm of 2D by technology. As computing power increased and more and more games made the jump to 3D, Midway was compelled to keep up. Therefore, Mortal Kombat 4 followed previous 3D fighters like Tekken, ditching digitized actors for polygonal processing. On the business side, Midway decided to use an in-house-developed graphics chip entitled Zeus. It even employed extensive marketing tactics (HYPERLINK http://www.videogames.com/features/universal/history_mk/p3_07.html
  http://www.videogames.com/features/universal/history_mk/p3_07.html):

To kick off Mortal Kombat 4, Midway organized a 35-stop road tour of the US. Three large Penske trucks, decorated with Mortal Kombat 4 decals, were sent out to tour the Midwest, East Coast, and West Coast. Crowds waited in lines to play on two arcade machines. When they had finished playing their two games, they received a temporary tattoo and ballot to win a free MK4 T-shirt. The version that toured the nation was an early version that only contained nine characters, one of which was Noob Saibot, who simply had Reiko's moves. Though the version that toured was in a very early form, the road tour sparked great interest in the game, leaving fans wanting more.

Culturally, the developers recognized Americaís slow acceptance of violence in video games. They went back to the simple blood and fatalities of the original, causing a surge of approval from gamers. In fact, the only element which inhibited the popularity of Mortal Kombat 4 was the multitude of rushed versions.
    Two console games, Mortal Kombat Gold and Mortal Kombat Special Forces, are only slightly noteworthy in this history. One simply mashed all of the games together to make some more money, while the other was a 3D version of Mortal Kombat Mythologies: Sub-Zero. It was during development of Mortal Kombat Special Forces that John Tobias left Midway, leaving fans wondering what will happen to the series.
    Speaking of which, Mortal Kombat 5 is in its early stages right now. The remaining development team has visions of an idealistic, fully-3D fighting game filled with blood and brand new fatalities. They want to disregard the pressure of culture and business to make use of the technology in an appropriate fashion: getting back to designing games the way they want to.
    And so the progression comes round full circle. It began with an original game tied to the violence in America. A cultural backlash added fantastic elements to form a popular sequel. Greedy business rushed the third installment into failure, leaving graphics technology to revolutionize Mortal Kombat 4.

Unfortunately, graphics technology has gone so far as to make console systems and home computers the only viable market. Hence Midwayís recent decision to exit the coin-op realm. But as the design team settles in to make Mortal Kombat 5, hopefully tapping into their previous creativity and brushes with success, what is the lasting significance of this series? Clearly, it is without a doubt the issues surrounding video game violence. Along with Id, Mortal Kombat was a serious trigger in that debate. The game was, is, and probably always will be centered on blood and fatalities. It is very unlikely that you will ever hear a gamer claim he plays Mortal Kombat for the control and strategy. Also, when one considers that such technological and business decisions progress similarly with nearly all games (the evolution of Mario or Zelda would be a straightforward comparison), it appears as though the Mortal Kombat series truly grips its place in history through cultural significance. As for the final verdict on Mortal Kombatís realistic violence, that is material for a completely separate case (HYPERLINK http://www.mk5.org/sections/news/news.shtml
   http://www.mk5.org/sections/news/news.shtml):

The associated press reported recently that Andrea Wilson from Norwalk Connecticut filed suit on November 22, 2000 against Midway Games who manufacture Mortal Kombat and other video games. Andrea Wilson claims that her son Noah and his friend were playing an arcade version of Mortal Kombat. Soon after Noah was wielded by a kitchen knife by his friend who Andrea claims was mocking the Mortal Kombat arcade game. 13 year old Noah died Nov. 22, 1997 just an hour after the incident. Noah and his friend were on their way to see Mortal Kombat: Annihilation. Here is an excerpt from part of the suit:

ìMortal Kombat was intentionally and/or negligently designed by defendant Midway to addict young viewers to its realistic violence through the use of virtual reality, while convincing these immature viewers that what they observed was only a game and no one would be harmed if these viewers ëplayedí out the violent acts they observed, notwithstanding the very real violence portrayed in the video game.