

MARIO KART

Hierarchy of Videogames



Marisa C. Juárez
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Action, Arcade Driving/Racing Games, Basic Arcade/Platform Games, Fighting Games, First Person Shooters, Adventure/Role Playing, Simulation, Sports, Strategy/Wargames- these are some of the most popular ways of categorizing genres of video games (Walker 105). Today, there are hundreds of thousands of video games, including some that do not fit in any genre; so which are the best, and how do we decide which ones to play? Unlike most consumers, video gamers don't tend to base their buying on price, for with video games, it will always go down with time. Instead, gamers pay more attention to how fun a game is, word of mouth/friends' reviews, and previous experience playing (demos in stores). One game that has done particularly well, has gotten good reviews, plays for hours and has a great fan base, is MarioKart. Only recently introduced to the world first through the Super Nintendo Entertainment System (SNES), then through the Nintendo 64, MarioKart has created an interesting place for itself in the history of video games. By going through this history and explaining why MarioKart is so popular, what makes it so fun, we will see why MarioKart is here to stay as a game that will be a classic for years to come, despite the current trend in storytelling games.

The first "video game" was called "The Tennis Program," created in 1958 by Willy Higinbotham at the Brookhaven National Laboratory in Upton, New York. It was played on an oscilloscope, connected to an analog computer. This "program" opened the world to video games, and in 1972 the first home TV game system was released, the Magnavox Odyssey. On June 27, 1972, Nolan Bushnell would establish the Atari company, which would later come out with "Pong," an evolution of the Tennis Program

(Jase). Around this time Atari would release some of the first racing games, such as Street Racer for the Atari 2600 (Chance). However, Atari's Night Driver, released in 1976, would be the first racing game in the first person perspective, as opposed to the characteristic aerial view of most racing games (Kuitteinen). A few years later, in 1981, Mario, the star of MarioKart, would say hello to Japan in the arcade game Donkey Kong (TW) at the same time that Sega would release its racing game Turbo (Burke). Created by Mr. Shigeru Miyamoto, who joined Nintendo (from the playing card company of 1889, Nintendo Koppai, translated as "Work hard, but in the end it is in Heaven's hands") at the age of 24 after graduating from college in Japan, Mario was first called "Jumpman," then later renamed after the owner of Nintendo's first warehouse, Mario Segali. In 1983 Mario received his first feature game, another arcade game, Mario Bros., which also introduced his brother Luigi. A huge success, Mario would be featured in a slew of games (Mirabella). Following Atari's success in the 1970's, video game consoles were soon to follow, and in 1986 the company that would introduce MarioKart, one of the most famous names in video games, Nintendo would release its Nintendo Entertainment System (NES) to the world. It would sell for \$199 in the US and include a copy of the Super Mario Bros. game (Jase), which introduced Mario's enemy, Bowser, and the Princess Peach (TW). Mario would continue to make games, and when the Super NES was released in 1991, Super MarioKart followed on September 1, 1992. Miyamoto and the Nintendo Entertainment, Analysis, and Development team (EAD) (Brown, 1) struck gold when they created the first go-kart, cartoon racing game that allowed players to race with the many ever-popular Nintendo characters, controlling Mario and Luigi,

Bowser and the Princess, as well as Koopa Troopa, Donkey Kong, Jr., Yoshi, and Toad (Davis Media).

Though it was from a third-person perspective, Super MarioKart quickly became a classic that fans never tire of playing, even today.

As the popularity of MarioKart grew, 1996 brought the release of the Nintendo 64 (Jase), and with it great expectations for MarioKart 64, finally released on February 12, 1997. This newer version offered the same exciting play and even more familiar characters, but was in 3D, included more difficult tracks, had two camera angles and three different engine speeds: 50cc, 100cc, and 150cc (Jim). The sequel flew to the top of the charts, coming in at fourth in the UK for the top-selling Christmas toys of 1997 (Jenkins), and staying at the top of EuroSpeak's charts for 29 consecutive weeks (Jenkins)! Only four years later, on July 21, 2001, MarioKart Super Circuit was released for the Game Boy Advance. A combination of its predecessors, this version included all of the characters from both games, a multiplayer mode, and twenty new tracks, using elements from both previous games (Jim). Clearly, MarioKart was here to stay.

How was MarioKart doing it, how were Miyamoto and his team accomplishing this success? To understand this we first have to take a closer look at the mechanics of a successful video game. For the most part, a successful game is one that sells well, and in order to sell, a player has to want to buy; to buy, a player must want to play. The desire to play a game is reduced to how addictive a game is for the player. Indeed, by 1995 there was already a wave of concern that children were becoming addicted to video games in the same dangerous way that some adults were addicted to drugs: "Video games--Fun or addiction?...According to the British Psychological Society, [they] can be

both habit-forming and addictive, and...may bring on...the same emotional withdrawal symptoms as quitting smoking, drugs, or alcohol (Anonymous).” Fortunately, Loftus and Loftus have a better way of explaining our “addiction” through psychological reinforcement:

...for the video game player, beating a previous high score or winning a free game...is a reinforcement...central...is the idea that any behavior that is followed by reinforcement will increase in frequency. In short, video games that do something to make a player feel good will be played again and again (14).

In MarioKart, there are two main reinforcements: beating a low time on a track, or getting a high score by beating other players in battle. Most racing games use time as their reinforcement, since the idea of a race is to be the fastest time. However, “battle mode” is what made MarioKart 64 infamous among racing games. With only three balloons per player to hit, battles are fast and furious in trying to avoid attacks and yet be agile enough to attack opponents. Four different arenas to choose from require various strategies, and knowing the terrain well can help lead to a win. Of course, what better reinforcement is there, what feels better, than having the most wins?

These two forms of reinforcement also follow Loftus and Loftus’ ideal schedule of reinforcement, known as “partial reinforcement” (variable). With partial reinforcement, players will keep responding in the absence of reinforcement because they are hoping that another reward is just around the corner (16). For MarioKart, it is a personal partial reinforcement in that no matter your skill level, you aren’t guaranteed to improve your time each time that you race a certain track, nor are you guaranteed to beat all your opponents every time you battle. Yet that one amazingly fast time and triumph in battle is what keeps players coming back for more.

According to Guus Sschijns, a “Game = (abstract) simulation of a subset of reality within certain given constraints.” He goes on to show that the main characteristics of a game consist of a closed environment with formal and unambiguous rules and goals, a model of a subset of reality, interaction between players, a safe end where no one gets hurt (physically, mentally, etc.), and a set of goals for the player to achieve. In racing games, the rules are generally to stay on the track and speed around it for a fixed number of times, then the fastest time/first person to finish wins. It is a chance to drive at what would be unsafe speeds in real life, and a thrill to indulge in that fantasy, to indulge in competition among friends. So what is it that makes MarioKart special amongst racing games, that has made it a classic amongst all video games? Schijn quotes Wolfgang Kramer on the critical success factors for a game: Originality of game; freshness and “replayability”; surprise; no “Kingmaker effect;” no early elimination; quality of components; consistency of rules; tension; learning and mastering the game. MarioKart’s originality overall sets it apart from other racing games. We’ve already discussed the existence of the battle mode, but “MarioKart [also] single-handedly created the cartoon racing genre (Brown, 2).” Most racing games try to create their cars to capture the look and feel of a real race car. MarioKart not only used go-karts instead of race cars, it made them cartoonish in traditional style of past Mario games. This introduced fan-based loyalty to the game, for lovers of Mario could not help but love MarioKart, especially with the familiar cartoon settings and characters. This gave MarioKart an immediate edge over other racing games. This also was what made it fresh, because it’d never been done in racing games. Replayability is what has players coming back to Super MarioKart, even two generations of MarioKart later. Each game of MarioKart is always

going to be different, because of variables of players, skill level, and chance, yet it will always be just as much fun each time around. Surprises in the game may come from unexpected leads in a player with a low skill level, or the gain of a powerful weapon (blue shell) that turns around the whole outcome of the race. The Kingmaker effect is the idea that if one player has an advantage early on, the other players will never have a chance of winning. The nice programming about MarioKart is the small mechanism that gives the best weapons to the players in the last places, and the worst weapons to the players in first. This gives losing players a chance to catch up and even win. Nor does MarioKart support early elimination- all players stay in the game throughout the various races, even if they finish last each race. The same is true in battle, because there are so few hits (balloons) until a player is knocked out; even in a four player battle the first person knocked out will have a very short wait until they are back in the battle. Certainly the quality of MarioKart's components can be summed up in its loveable cartoon style, the consistency of its rules are the same as other racing games, tension exists in the thrill of the competition, and learning and mastering the game is easily acquired through normal repeated play, giving many possibilities to improve skill. It is no wonder that MarioKart has been such a success!

We have seen the unique place MarioKart has in the history of video games, being the first cartoon racing game in the racing genre, a 3D game from a third person perspective with familiar, loved characters. We have also shown why it has been so successful, with an infamous battle mode and characteristics that make it more fun than other racing games out there. Now, we will soon see the next generation of MarioKart this June, when Nintendo releases MarioKart for the GameCube. The fact that Nintendo

is consistently releasing newer versions of MarioKart reflects the public's love of the game and demand for more MarioKart as newer technologies are developed. MarioKart for the GameCube "will feature characters constructed of more polygons than ever before and they will spring to life with amazingly detailed animations (Anonymous)."

Anticipation for the new MarioKart ranges from "A new Mario Kart? Nintendo, we love you so." to "Well, we [were] all hoping this would happen, and of course we will not be let down...Mario Kart is one of those long running classics that no Nintendo owner can go without, and i'm expecting the same from this version (Davis Media)." Anticipation also surrounds the rumors of Sega's character Sonic to appear in this new MarioKart, since Sega has now licensed Sonic to Nintendo, as well as the possibility of online gaming for MarioKart. An interview with Miyamoto, the creator himself, reflected the same ideas:

...I wish we could discuss some of the innovation that we're going to be introducing with Mario Kart, but I can't just yet. I can tell you that work is progressing on it, and just the other day, a North American localization group completed voice recording for the game...We've been conducting online experiments with Mario Kart for quite some time. This time around, we've looked at it, and I still feel that the kind of experience Mario Kart delivers would be very difficult to pull off online (Kasavin).

Regardless of its features, MarioKart has proven itself in the world of video games, and it will be around for a very long time, as classics should be.

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