

Super Mario Kart

Throughout most of my life, video games have provided me with a source of enjoyment to which I could always turn, no matter how much it was raining outside. From my earliest memories on my beautifully simple Atari 2600 to my most recent experiences with advanced 3D on my computer, games have always been able to provide me with greatly engrossing experiences. However, as newer and more advanced games and systems appear on the market, the favorite games of yesteryear all shelve to collect dust. Only a few games can stand the test of time and make you reach for them instead of the newer, snazzier ones, and, when you do reach for them, you reach for them over and over again. A perfect example of such a game is Super Mario Kart.

Super Mario Kart (released September 1992) was developed for the Super Nintendo Entertainment System (SNES) by Nintendo's legendary in-house team known as Nintendo Entertainment, Analysis, and Development (EAD). Led by the god of video game designers Shigeru Miyamoto, EAD has created many of the most recognizable games and characters on the planet, most notably those associated with the Mario and the Legend of Zelda series. Other major players involved in Super Mario Kart's production were Producers Takashi Tezuka, Genyo Takeda, and Kenji Miki. The team of lead programmers consisted of Yasunari Nishida, Kenzo Hayakawa, Yuichi Yamamoto, Masato Kimura, and Kazuaki Morita.

A well-developed story line for Super Mario Kart is virtually non-existent. Super Mario Kart race track is run by Lakitu, a little guy who floats around in a cloud and performs vital tasks like starting the race, warning drivers who are going the wrong way, and pulling drivers and their karts out of any jams they may have gotten themselves into, e.g., deep water, bottomless pits, lava, etc. In the single player game, the player controls one of eight well-known Mario-series characters as he tries to beat the other drivers in the Mario Kart Grand Prix. The Grand Prix consists of three speed/skill classes, 50cc, 100cc, and the hidden 150cc, and four groups of tracks, the Mushroom Cup, Flower Cup, Star Cup, and the hidden Special Cup, which is unlocked after you have won gold in the first three cups. Each track has a theme, like the haunted house based Ghost Valley or the racetrack based Mario Circuit. Along the way, the player must navigate hairpin turns while avoiding items such as turtle shells and banana peels, which are thrown by other players with bad intentions. These items can be found for one's own use by running over a question mark (?) box on the track. Meanwhile, each driver can also run over and collect coins; the more coins you hold, the faster you can drive, but, if you hit another kart or are wiped out by one of the aforementioned items, coins are lost. The player can advance to the next track by placing fourth or better, after which she receives points depending on place: 1 for 4th, 3 for 3rd, 6 for 2nd, and 9 for 1st. When all five tracks have successfully been completed, the player's point total is compared to that of the computer-controlled characters, and a cup (gold, silver, or bronze) is awarded appropriately.

Super Mario Kart single handedly created the cartoon mascot-racing genre. All aspects of the game reflect this concept. Unlike traditional racing games that try to reproduce the look of a real or futuristic car, the graphics of Super Mario Kart are

decidedly cartoony and borrow heavily from the well-recognized Mario style. The relatively simple graphical style is made to look and feel remarkable using the SNES's famous "Mode 7" technology, which allows extensive scaling and rotating of sprites and bitmaps and makes the driving experience a thrilling one as your view of the track adjusts with each turn. The cartoon style also lends itself to the "weapons" of the game: turtle shells, banana peels, and lightning bolts that shrink the other drivers to miniatures. The playful nature of these barely violent items is consistent with EAD's trend of producing games suitable for as wide an audience as possible. If any weak point exists, it lies within the sounds of the game, which are all rather simplistic. Of course, as mentioned above, the cartoon nature of the game calls for a certain simplicity, but one would think that a kart jump noise could be better than a simple 'dink,' even if it was just a nicely sounded out 'boing.' The music is also rather simplistic but are composed in the traditional Mario style, so veteran players often find it comforting instead of annoying.

The one aspect of the game that really made it the classic it has become would undoubtedly be the Battle Mode. In this two-player mode, each player chooses a driver and agrees on one of four battle arenas. Each arena has a simple square-based layout of driving space, divided by walls, and has scattered throughout it the question mark boxes that contain the items discussed above. With each player occupying his own half of the screen (a convention to be copied in future games ranging from racing to puzzles to James Bond), the object of Battle Mode is to use these items to attack your opponent three times to destroy the three balloons surrounding his kart. The last kart standing is the winner. This is where the replay value is practically infinite. The arenas are all fairly small and item packed, which makes for a frantic atmosphere of chasing and being

chased. Allowing only three hits for the loser makes the matches quick and simply begs to be played “just one more time” over and over again. In fact, a close second to the fun level of playing Battle Mode is watching your friends play. The energy and exhilaration is contagious, and, eventually, the spectators have no choice but to join in on the yelling and trash-talking themselves.

The multiplayer Battle Mode is the ultimate in 'replayability,' but other aspects of the game lend themselves well to replaying as well. Another two-player mode that can hold players enrapt for hours is the simple Match Race: a one-on-one race around a track of your choosing. Besting the other player by a fraction of a second at the finish line is sure to cause an immediate rematch. The single player modes also hold up well.

Notably, the computer drivers' AI system allows for limited levels of self-adjusting speeds. Unless the player is a complete novice or an unbeatable Mario Kart master, some of the computer players always seem to make it a tight race. Thus, especially at the lower skill levels, if the player has fallen a little behind, the pack of computer drivers will often lag just enough to let the player regain a competitive position in the race. Once that has occurred, the AI again removes its kid gloves and keeps the race tight from that point on. Similarly, especially at the higher levels, no matter how many times you toss a shell at the fastest computer opponent, they always seem to be right on your tail a short time later. Here, the computer gives itself the ability to catch up quickly and, once there, breathes down your neck until you make a mistake and allow it to pass. These catching-up techniques give the Grand Prix mode longer life than it could have had otherwise. Finally, for the purists, the Time Trial mode lets the player compete with his best competition: himself. My friends and I would frequently find ourselves going back to

this game looking for another elusive shortcut that could knock a few tenths of a second of our best times and give us better bragging material the next time we met.

In the big picture of video games, Super Mario Kart set the standard for cartoon racing games. In fact, despite the amazing progress of the available technology and the numerous attempts to duplicate its success, many believe the original remains better than any other pretenders to the throne, including EAD's very own upgraded sequel for the Nintendo 64, Mario Kart 64. Super Mario Kart not only popularized the cartoon racing genre but also the "split-screen" multiplayer layout that would become a cornerstone in multiplayer console game play and development. In terms of technology, Super Mario Kart took the simple yet powerful Mode 7 technology and made a racing game more fun than even its 3D version ended up being. In terms of industry, it is safe to call this game an unbridled success with over 3.8 million sales, placing it at number seven on the all-time sales list of all console games as of October 2000 (positions one through six are held by Tetris, Pokemon, and even more Mario games). However, no single one of these reasons explains why Super Mario Kart is a legend in its own time. All it took was taking the racing concept and making it even simpler. No need for true-to-life graphics or a perfect first-person driving simulation. EAD used their magic to take a simple racing concept, add brand name characters, throw in an insanely addictive head-to-head mode, and out came a masterpiece. I could write more, but I think I can improve my time on Rainbow Road.