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STS145: History of Computer Game Design
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Super Mario Bros. 3

I. Game Information:

Super Mario Bros. 3
Publisher: Nintendo of America Inc.
US Release: 1990
Copyright: 1988
Designer: Sigeru Miyamoto
Console/Platform: Nintendo Entertainment System (NES)

II. Story Line and Game-Play:

In Super Mario Bros. 3 (SMB3) the familiar Mario brothers (Mario and Luigi) face their old nemesis from the first Mario Bros. game, Bowser, king of the Koopas. The story is not all that different from the first game in the series. Bowser has seized the Mushroom World again but this time he is sending his children into the world to make mischief. The children stole the royal magic wands of the kings of each of the countries in the World and have turned them into animals with the wands. Mario and Luigi, guided by Princess Toadstool are charged with defeating Bowser's children and recovering the wands to return the Mushroom World to normalcy.

Mario and Luigi must travel through the eight kingdoms of the Mushroom World and defeat Bowser's seven children and eventually defeat Bowser himself. The eight worlds are full of all sorts of enemies to hinder the brothers and several obstacles and puzzles for them to solve. At the end of each world the Princess offers hints and rewards the brothers with an item they can use. However, before the last level, Bowser kidnaps the Princess, giving the brothers an added incentive.

The game is divided into the eight kingdoms; each of which is further divided into several action scenes. Within a kingdom, Mario and Luigi travel around on a map, selecting the

action scenes they would like to attempt to pass. Some scenes are optional; others must be completed before the brothers can move on. In addition to the action scenes there are other spots on the map that allow the player to attempt to get extra lives or get extra items. Mario and Luigi can store items in a container only accessible while on the map. These items can either enhance the brothers' abilities while in an action scene or allow the brothers to manipulate the map, destroying barriers or warping to other kingdoms. The various items include standards from previous Mario games such as super mushrooms and fire flowers (which make Mario larger and give him the ability to hurl fireballs). They also include items that allow Mario to fly, change into a frog and swim, become invincible or throw hammers.

Most of the game-play takes place within the action scenes. In these scenes, Mario and Luigi must face their enemies and solve the puzzles of the game. These scenes are quite complete. The brothers can travel all over, tracing back to screens they have visited already as well as exploring the sky above by flying and occasionally going below ground. There are a wide variety of enemies with a myriad of attacking methods ranging from jumping on Mario to exploding near him. At the end of an action scene the player is rewarded with a card. After collecting three cards, the player gets an extra life. If the player can collect three of the same card, the player can get more than one life. Additional action scenes include castles that unlock other areas on the map and the airships of Bowser's children. Splitting the game up into these action scenes and distributing them on a map makes the game much more playable as it allows for many distinct challenges and also allows the player to take a break between action scenes.

The actual game-play within the action scenes is quite enjoyable. Mario's new capabilities add much to the game, giving the player many different ways to tackle the enemies and puzzles of the game. The control is very responsive and the game has a unique feel for most

of the different states in which Mario can exist. For example swimming in the frog suit feels very different than simply swimming normally. The difference in feel adds both challenge and interest to the game-play. Mario is responsive to the player's control but the player must learn the nuances of the different suits Mario can wear. This adds to the challenge and draws the player further into the game.

Although the story of the game is extremely simplistic, it still is very entertaining and even addictive. SMB3 is among the best games released for the NES platform as far as game-play is concerned. It has a very good combination of intense action requiring skill and difficult puzzles requiring thought. It is hard to categorize this game as it combines some elements of traditional side-scrolling console games (the action scenes) with strategy/role-playing games (travelling on a map and selecting challenges to face) however I would place it more with the former than the later.

Graphics/Technology:

SMB3 was distributed for the Nintendo Entertainment System (NES). Compared to games today, the NES and SMB3 have extremely primitive graphics. Much of the game appears somewhat pixelated and rough. However, compared to other NES games SMB3 has graphics that are quite good. The game feels smoother than most NES games and the animation is much smoother. In the original Super Mario Bros. game one feels like one can actually count the pixels that make up Mario. In SMB3 the graphics are much smoother; although everything is somewhat blocky it is to a much lesser degree than previous games. The animation is incredibly smooth for a NES game and it only becomes choppy when a large number of enemies (over 5) are on the screen at once.

As SMB3 is a NES game, the control interface and hardware that drives the game comes from the NES console. A control pad provides the control interface. Although the standard NES

control pads would not win any ergonomics awards (the directional button has a tendency to cause blisters) the pad is functional and perfectly adequate for the game. The player controls direction with the control pad and uses the two buttons of the control pad to do a variety of things. The 'A' button makes Mario jump and float or fly when possible while the 'B' has multiple uses, allowing Mario to accelerate when running, pick up enemies that have been immobilized, fire fireballs or hammers, and use a tail attack on enemies when Mario has a tail. This division of tasks between the two buttons works well; they are easy to remember and no two functions of a particular button overlap.

The NES also provides ample computing power to give the enemies intelligence. Enemies know when Mario is near them and some projectiles and enemies can even track Mario, following him around the screen. These seem like trivial characteristics now but they are quite impressive for a NES game. The game also provides for a versus mode where the two players can compete for positioning on the game map as well as the cards that they earn at the end of the action scenes. This is done well as an enjoyable throwback to the original Mario Bros./Donkey Kong game.

Game Design:

In all, SMB3's design was quite well done. The game requires a great deal of both skill and strategy. Different action scenes emphasize one or the other or both. Some require the player to quickly move through a world (by automatically scrolling it) while others require the player to solve a maze to reach the end. The action scenes vary in difficulty from fairly simple to frustratingly difficult. However, even the frustratingly difficult ones are laid out in such a way that the player knows that success is possible, just not easy. For example in one action scene, the player must make a very difficult jump to reach the end of the scene. The end is in sight, the jump is possible but the player must get it just right to succeed.

Although none of the puzzles are all that difficult, they do present some interesting challenges. Some of the maze worlds are difficult to solve and require some creativity. Perhaps the most interesting puzzles involve exploring the map and selecting the best path. Since some scenes can be skipped, the player must choose the best path or simply tackle every scene just for the challenge. There are also interesting choices to be made since the player has the option of selecting the point at which certain items should be used. For example using the frog suit on a certain scene may make it much easier or using a hammer at a certain point on the map will lead to a warp whistle that can take the player to any world in the game.

All of these choices contribute significantly to the game's replay value. The options of the game mean that it can be enjoyable to play a second or third time. In fact the game is still very enjoyable after playing several times. Each time through the game can be different as the player may or may not choose to explore different scenes. Additionally there is the lure of using different suits and items at different points in the game. After flying through a scene in one time through the game, the player may decide to simply stay on the ground and throw fireballs at the enemies. Eventually the game will become boring. However, it takes much longer than other games with linear stories. Certain scenes are just fun to play, regardless of how many times they have been played previously.

Conclusions:

SMB3 was one of the best games made available for the NES console. At the time of its release it received a marketing push unlike any other game in history, even being included in Nintendo's movie *The Wizard*. By the time it was released, the hype surrounding the game was enormous and the game's sales reflected that hype. SMB3 sold more copies than any game in history and grossed more than $500 million.[1] The game not only delivered on the hype from the

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[1] From <u>Game Over Press Start to Continue</u> by David Sheff. CyberActive Publishing, Wilton, CT. 1999.

business end but also lived up to its reputation from a game-play perspective. It was one of the best games for the NES console and remains an enjoyable game to play ten years after its release, an amazing feat considering the advances in video game technology that have taken place over the last ten years.