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A LOOK AT THE HISTORY AND LEGACY OF MARIO

NEWS Mar 09, 2018 by: Leo Parrill

March 10th is MAR10 day.

It’s not exactly a federally recognized holiday (yet), more of a marketing push by Nintendo, but the fact they can pull this off at all is a testament to just how profoundly Mario has impacted our global culture.

How did a bizarre amalgamation of disparate concepts from the eighties become the most widely identifiable video game character of all time? Why does Mario persevere across over decades of console generations and changing tastes?

Let’s take this day to reflect on how Mario got where he is. How he has not only managed to stay relevant, but increasingly popular throughout the last three decades.

A Brief History Of Mario

HAPPY
MAR10 DAY

Mario is the brainchild of a then young programmer by the name of Shigeru Miyamoto. In his attempt to create a best selling arcade machine for Nintendo, Miyamoto came up with a bizarre concept: what would happen if a King-Kong like ape kidnapped a woman from a construction site, and hurled barrels at the protagonist trying to rescue her?
This influential game would become *Donkey Kong*.

Miyamoto designed this protagonist (called Jumpman initially) with the hardware limitations of the time very much in mind. The programmer gave him a hat so that he wouldn’t have to design or animate hair or a forehead. Jumpman was given his signature large nose and moustache as a way to make him appear more human. His contrasted color scheme was designed to keep his small frame from blending into the background.

The design came from necessity and technical limitations, but how did a young Japanese computer engineer choose the name Mario? According to a fairly well corroborated story, Nintendo was in a financial dispute with a warehouse owner named Mario Segale, and after it was resolved, Miyamoto thought the name fit.

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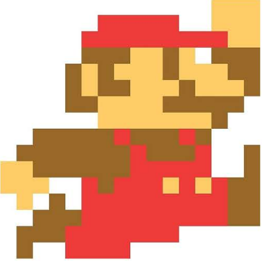


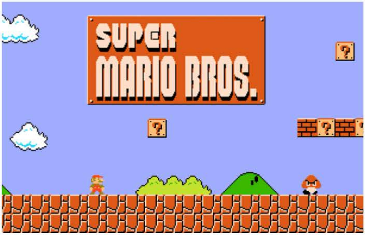
The resemblance is uncanny no doubt.

After the smashing success of *Donkey Kong*, people wanted more Mario. Nintendo was only too happy to give them more of their new mascot, and Mario would go on to star in more than 200 games over the next few decades.

Quite an accomplishment for a character designed around limited tech.

The first title that arguably brought Mario to the forefront of the public pop media consciousness was the Miyamoto directed *Super Mario Bros.*, released for the Famicom and NES in 1985. This title was incredibly important to the Mario franchise, as it established some of the formula we still know today. Those strange and now familiar concepts include Bowser as a nefarious fire-breathing, spiked turtle who's obsessed with kidnapping Princess Toadstool, the colorful Mushroom Kingdom as a setting, and the concept of platforming through increasingly difficult terrain with the help of wacky powerups like mushrooms and fire flowers.

Not only was *Super Mario Bros.* popular, it had a huge impact on the video game industry when it was released, and is often credited with helping to turn around the fortunes of the business after the terrible market crash of 1983. It was met with immense critical and commercial success, sold more than 40 million physical units, and helped turn Nintendo into a titan of the video game world.



There were two sequels released on the NES. *Super Mario Bros. 2* was an interesting departure from the first title, and included very different mechanics like the ability to choose characters, and a bizarre emphasis on vegetables. Next came the critically lauded *Super Mario Bros. 3*, which is to this day widely considered one of the best games of all time. In addition to the trilogy of primary titles, there was a glut of spinoffs across platforms like the Gameboy.

With the release of the Super Nintendo, it was time for Mario to move into the 16 Bit universe. *Super Mario World* was released on the SNES in 1990, and was bigger than anything that had come before. It looked better, the music was more sophisticated, and the levels were devilishly clever. *Super Mario World* also introduced the world to Yoshi, a loveable green dinosaur that would go on to be one of the most successful characters in the franchise.

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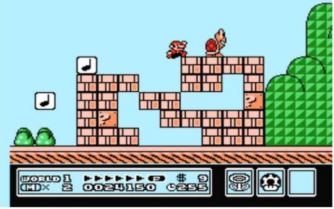


Super Mario World is often considered the pinnacle of the franchise's two dimensional installments, and ended up selling roughly 20 million copies. It has since been ported to countless Nintendo consoles, and remains one of Mario's most enduring and endearing adventures.

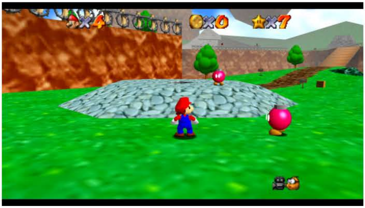
By this point, Mario's popularity was unprecedented, and it was clear that the world was developing Nintendo fever.

Movies And Polygons

The world was not ready.

This culminated in the release of a live action Super Mario Bros. film starring Bob Hoskins and John Leguizamo in 1993. The movie is a bizarre take on the franchise that rested on the premise that the Mushroom Kingdom was a post apocalyptic parallel dimension. It was a critical and commercial failure, but even the film's lack of success did little to taint the name of everyone's favorite Italian plumber.

The next substantial transition in the Mario franchise was the inevitable move to 3D with the advent of 3D capable systems like the Playstation, Sega Saturn, and, of course, the Nintendo 64.



Super Mario 64 found Miyamoto back in the driver's seat as director and producer, and was released as a launch game for the Nintendo 64 in 1996. It blew everyone away, and spawned an entirely new generation of platformers that attempted to emulate the collectathon gameplay.

The inclusion of an analog stick on the Nintendo 64's controversial claw controller allowed for true 3D movement, and being able to control the camera allowed players, for the first time, to really explore the Mushroom Kingdom in three dimensions. The immersion was increased by bright, colorful, polygonal graphics, and extraordinarily catchy music by now legendary Nintendo composer Koji Kondo.

Video unavailable

This video contains content from Nintendo, who has blocked it on copyright grounds.

Super *Mario 64* sold around eleven million copies, and ended up being the Nintendo 64's best selling game. Though it didn't quite save the N64 from the behemoth that was the disc-based Playstation, it successfully brought Mario into the third dimension. That transition was not so easy for every mascot. (Cough****DK64****Cough)

Super Mario Sunshine

The next Mario game in the main series was *Super Mario Sunshine* for the Gamecube in 2002. It felt similar to Mario 64, though the varied levels were replaced by the tropical paradise Delfino, and Mario was teamed up with a intelligent water cannon called FLUDD. This surprising decision provided some different movement mechanics, as Mario could make use of water jets to get around in addition to his trademark jumping.

Mario burst back into the mainstream (though he never really left) with *Super Mario Galaxy* and *SMG 2* on Nintendo's immensely successful follow up to the Gamecube, the Wii. Both of these games were universally acclaimed for their graphics, music, and incredibly tight planet exploration and gravity based platforming.

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Following the *Galaxy* games was *Super Mario 3D* World for the Wii U. This title did not allow the player to fully control the camera, and focused more on multiplayer, but had some incredibly interesting level design and beautiful visuals. Despite the Wii U's poor sales, the title still managed to sell over five million units.

Mario's most recent title is *Super Mario Odyssey* for Nintendo's immensely successful Switch. You can read our review here for more details, but suffice it to say *Super Mario Odyssey* takes what everyone loves about Mario's core gameplay and expertly brings it to an entirely new audience.

Super Mario Odyssey - Game Trailer - Nintendo E3 2017
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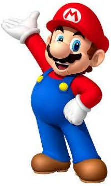
It's beyond the scope of this article to talk about every Mario game and spinoff ever released, that would require a book, but it's clear that he has tapped into something shared by hundreds of millions of gamers throughout the decades.

So what is it exactly about Mario that keeps us coming back, decade after decade, game after game?

Like any successful franchise there are a variety of factors, but breaking down Mario into his most basic characteristics might provide some insight.

Character And Narrative Accessibility

First, let's examine Mario as a character.



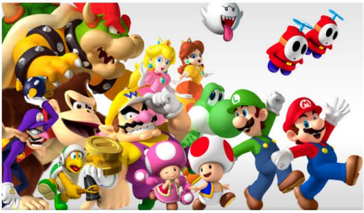
He's always been defined by the circumstances he encounters. He has no substantial canon backstory to speak of, and no real personal characteristics other than that he has a unique look, he's brave and kind, he has a brother named Luigi, he's (sometimes?) a plumber, and he has an undying loyalty to Princess Peach/Toadstool. There have been some attempts to establish a more robust backstory, like in *Super Mario Galaxy* with Rosalina's Storybook, but overall it's a simple narrative. Bowser steals the Princess, Mario goes on a quest to save her with the help of a colorful cast of characters and powerups, and Mario is inevitably victorious.

That being said, simplicity is not always a weakness. In this case, having the narrative and the primary protagonist be reliable and accessible is a source of strength. You always know what to expect when you play a Mario game, and that's comforting.

His lack of identifiable character or backstory allows the player to put themselves in Mario's shoes, similar to his even less vocal coworkers Link and Samus. Mario does speak from time to time, ever since Charles Martinet gave him a voice in 1990, but his trademark "Yahoos!" and "Wahas!" along with the occasional exclamation allow plenty of filler to be provided by the player's imagination.

Keeping the character and the story simple while constantly changing the mechanics isn't a lack of inventiveness or ingenuity, it's an inclusionary measure that has proven to work for decades.

Charm



While stylistic preferences are entirely subjective, it's easy to argue that the character and environmental design in Mario games is both surreal and extraordinarily charming. From the sound Toad makes when you hop on his head, to the shy ghosts that turn around when you look at them, everything is round, and bright, and anthropomorphized. It all lends itself to an aesthetic that could be seen as overly "cutesy" by some, but that's an oversimplification of the huge amount of work that went into developing these consistently adorable characters and environments.

The priority is to be kid friendly sure, but there's no reason an adult can't enjoy these spectacularly designed and creative environments. You can love *Bloodborne's* gore splattered Yharnam, and Tamriel's alien Morrowind, but the Mushroom Kingdom is right up there among the most consistently intriguing and entertaining settings in video games.

Gentle Difficulty Curve

Those who dismiss Mario games as too "kiddy" often think that the games are simplistic and sacrifice difficulty to be accessible to casual players. This is not accurate.

While modern Mario games do start off easy, as any platformer should, the difficulty is gradually increased as you progress. Your moveset grows as the obstacles become more treacherous, but usually you can get to Bowser, defeat him, and see the end credits with relatively little difficulty.

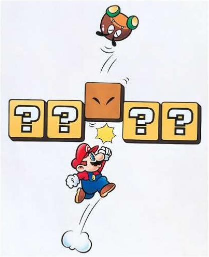
That being said, the game is far from over.

Usually there is a great deal left to collect, and more intense levels to face. As anyone who has beaten Long Journey's End in *Super Mario Odyssey*, or Luigi's Purple Coins in *Super Mario Galaxy* can tell you, Mario's endgame is NOT easy. It makes these challenges optional so those who are happy to see Mario defeat Bowser are satisfied, but those who want brutally difficult platforming have plenty to dig into.

This strategy isn't simplifying the game to be more accessible, it's good design that allows every player to get what they want from their purchase.

Fluidity Of Motion

It's great to have a fun, simple story and character, but that's worth nothing if the game doesn't feel good to play. Mario games have always been about the celebration of motion. Since Mario's first appearance as Jumpman in *Donkey Kong*, jumping has always been his MO, and though his moveset has changed dramatically over the decades, that's still fundamentally true. The *Galaxy* games added gravity and planet exploration, and *Super Mario Odyssey* gives Mario the power to possess enemies with his hat, but underneath all the updated graphics and mechanical shifts, the goal is still the same: you beat Mario games by jumping, and jumping well.



Making sure Mario controls properly is a critical piece of why his games have aged so well.

Precision and smoothness are paramount in a platformer, and Nintendo has always focused on making sure Mario controls properly regardless of console. Underneath the veneer of childlike whimsy lies a complex set of control systems that keep Mario relevant year after year.

Overwhelming Polish

The fluidity of control speaks to Mario's most admirable accomplishment: every game he stars in has an unparalleled level of polish. Nintendo is widely considered the best first party developer around for a reason, and that reason is that they don't release games until they are ready. We only get a mainstream Mario title every five years or so, but when we do, we can be assured it will be polished to almost perfection. There will be almost no game breaking bugs, and few graphical glitches. No game is perfect, and every game can be broken, but Nintendo goes far beyond the vast majority of developers when it comes to squashing bugs and making sure everything works as well as it can before release. No 20GB day one patches for the newest Mario.

Knowing when you buy a Mario game, or really any Nintendo developed game, that it's going to be a fully functional, complete, relatively bug free experience that's easy to pick up and play is a huge draw, and something many other developers are still struggling with.

The Legacy Of Mario

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There's plenty more that could be said about one of the most recognizable media figures in history, or the scores of interesting games he and the characters around him have spawned. But one thing is for sure: Mario is as popular as ever, and there's no sign that this is changing anytime soon.

Between the stellar sales of the Switch and *Odyssey*, and the announcement that he will soon be starring in his own (hopefully good) feature film, it looks like Mario will be around for generations to come.

So, on your day, we salute you Mario. Thank you for all the wonderful memories, for the contributions to the game industry as a whole. For the charming visuals, the polished gameplay, and some of the most memorable music of all time.

Here's to several more decades of the mustachioed plumber. Wahoo! indeed.

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Name

Alberto Tellez · 3 years ago

I love Mario for having given me a heck of a lot of wonderful moments when I play his games, and I love Mario overall.

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The ManRod · 3 years ago · edited

Mario 64 is, admittedly by Miyamoto, a stolen game from Argonaut Software's 3D Yoshi game pitch.

Nevet pitch a game concept to Nintendo or they will steal your idea.

Karma is a bitch Nintendo.

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