

Control Freak

Article scanné dans le magazine Super Play n°47 (Septembre 1996)

Sujet de l'article : Manette Nintendo 64 officielle grise

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CONTROL FREAK

According to Nintendo bigwig Howard Lincoln the N64 controller is its secret weapon. Super Play tells you why...

The joypad that Nintendo designed for the Super NES took the gaming world by storm. While Sega gave Mega Drive gamers something that looked like a crass spaceship, with clunky buttons and special grooves for palm sweat, the Nintendo equivalent fitted perfectly into mitts of all ages and gave the word 'ergonomic', which is a fancy term meaning working well with the human body, a whole new meaning. Now, with the N64 controller, the back room boffins in Japan have taken the concept of a control a step further. Or should we say a tiptoe, a stroll, a running leap, punch and butt slam forward.

It's no surprise that the N64 controller was built to showcase one particular game above all... *Mario 64*. The problems of moving a moustached plumber around with responsive and precise controls, which at the same time need to reposition cameras in a real 3D world, presented special problems to Nintendo designers. Added to that,

Six flavours – that's strawberry, lemon, blueberry... er... grey, purple and green.



though, is a desire to make the classical joypad work better with driving games, simulations and even beat-'em ups. So join us on a tour of Nintendo's latest and greatest controller ever made...

You just can't ignore that shape, can you? Three (count 'em) prongs. Separate handlebars, resembling some spooky, pointed, demonic gardening implement. Don't be afraid though. They have a nice organic feel and just like the curved edges on the SNES controller you'll instantly find them comfortable. The left and right prongs are intended to form-fit the player's hands, though the larger, centre one has a grip shaped somewhat like a flightstick. That's two regular, one ribbed, eh lads!

The trick is that there are three different ways to hold the controller, with positions you'll change according to the type of game you're playing. Check out the picture over the page for the details. Knowing that you don't always just have to hold it by the left

and right prongs is essential for getting started with the controller and thankfully those nice people at Nintendo are avoiding ever making games where you'll have to change grip mid-level.

Moving back into territory any respectable Nintendo player will be comfortable with, you'll find a cross pad on the left of the controller. This standard eight directional pad is typical of most controllers... most unrevolutionary. It's not much use for games that take place in 3D environments, as the inputs it provides are too limited. It's been left in for classical RPGs, puzzlers, sports games and arcade games like beat-'em ups. We'll come onto the joystick in a mo, but, suffice to say, for the quick turn arcaders you'll still need this basic control pad for directional movement.

On the buttons front, there are some welcome additions as well as classical touches. The triggers positioned on the top shoulders of the SNES joystick have been kept.

But where in SNES *Pilot Wings*, they gave a sharper turn, the top left button is now unused, while the right shoulder switch is used to change views.

And then there's the Z trigger. That's the name given to the new button hidden beneath the controller, on the central prong. The Z trigger, can do whatever a game designer decides, from firing a weapon to performing a special power. For example, in *Mario 64*, it does the funky butt slam, while in *Pilot Wings 64* on the gyro-copter level it fires your missiles – this instinctively feels right, as it's like a machine gun switch on a flight combat sim stick.

The right-hand side of the controller features four yellow buttons in a similar diamond pattern to the SNES joystick. These are called the C buttons, ostensibly because they're used to change camera angles while playing a game. Of course this is only in the 3D games. They'll also be useful in arcade games, like for example the SNES classic *Smash TV* where the four buttons were used as a directional controller for firepower. With this in mind, the yellow keys are helpfully embossed with direction arrows... just in case there's any confusion.

The A and B buttons, the blue and green ones respectively are positioned to the immediate left. This has a couple of key advantages. Firstly, it simplifies arcade games – how many times have you only had to use two of the buttons leaving the others in the diamond as duplicates just to confuse you? So where before you just used Y and B,

Howard sez ...

Transcript from Nintendo Ultra 64 Conference

Let me emphasize the capabilities of this new controller. All by itself, I think it will help revolutionize the video-game industry because it gives the entire development community the opportunity to do things that simply have not been possible before and it creates the potential for entirely new types of games...

Howard Lincoln, chairman of Nintendo of America.

now you'll get A and B. Cool huh! A much more useful reason for the six button cluster is beat-'em-ups. The now-standard *Street Fighter II*

layout, two rows of three buttons was unworkable on the old SNES pad meaning that a generation grew up relying on the shoulder pads for those hard attacks.

Now the controller can better emulate the arcade and (gah!) even the Sega joystick experience!

Staying with the buttons for only a moment longer, you'll notice that the red button in the middle is the Start. This marks the first time Nintendo's controllers will lack a

select button throughout all of their home console designs. Shock horror. But never mind... Everything you need can still be accessed as the Start switch will pause the action and call up menu systems a-go-go.

And at last, we're onto the most radical feature of all. The analog joystick. Positioned just underneath the start button above the centre handlebar, there's a tiny raised up plastic joystick which you control with your thumb. Time for a quick science lesson... (Skip this next paragraph if you're easily confused!)

Electricity is a complicated thing, but for the sake of simplicity let's assume there are two ways that information can be sent from your controller. Binary or analogue. Binary sends your console an on or off signal. That's a 0 or a 1 maths-heads. It's a button that's pressed in or left out. What analogue does instead is send a range of numbers to your PC. Rather than a switch, it's a position along an electrical coil. It can be lots of values. The technology harks back to those old paddles you used to get with knobs on for those cheesy old Binatona tennis games in the early eighties. So, as you can guess, this technology isn't exactly new. But give it a 3D lease of life and plug it into a super console like the N64 and the result is, let's say, electric.

The upshot of all this is much more precise and subtle controls.



Squeeze in the Z trigger to pull off that butt slam!



Time to pull that analogue stick back and to the right.

37m

What about virtual reality then?

There was a lot of talk at the genesis of the Nintendo 64 that it would be a virtual reality machine. Maybe, maybe too much talk. Nintendo are still hedging their bets and claiming that the 360 degree potential offered by the controller and the console's graphics capability is a form of VR anyway.

Whether they'll launch a head-mounted display, using technology prototyped for the Virtual Boy is still anyone's guess. Howard Lincoln is on the record as saying

"We don't have any plans for a head-mounted display. The power of the processor will allow us to do something like that but we're going to concentrate our efforts on getting the installed base up and we've got to do that by selling the hardware with traditional video games like *Super Mario 64*. I think at this point we regard the head-mounted display as a niche market, if at all." Yeah, right. Like, do you believe him when he says the N64 will make it to the UK for this Christmas?

Let's take the example of a driving game. A directional pad will give you a quick turn to the left, but what if you wanted to turn an onscreen steering wheel gradually or go to a full lock, perhaps accelerate quickly or dab the brakes? No problem with the joystick controller, as it enables you to make tight movements in minute degrees. That's why Mario can tiptoe, walk or run all with the same controller. PC gamers have had analogue joysticks and mice for ages and many swear that the fluid controller offers faster turning, for example a flick of the wrist in *Doom* and you're facing the other way, rather than waiting for a gradual rotation.

Beyond just the pointy, switchy bits there are a few other things you ought to know about the N64 controller. First of all, the system contains four controller inputs as opposed to the traditional two – which immediately gives you four-player capability. Wonderful news and blissfully free of tacky plug in four-play adaptors.

To make things easier the controllers are available as accessories in yellow, green, blue, red, grey and black. This enables you to further personalise game play since, the

OUTSIGHT

In a 3D world, like in *Mario 64*, your character can be lost behind objects. By switching the camera perspective horizontally, vertically, or by zooming in or out, all using the C buttons or shoulder pads, you can regain visual contact.



Keep an eye on Mario with the C buttons.

console box is aware of which colour controller you're playing with. So, if you're playing *Wayne Gretsky Hockey* and you plug in a red controller, the circle beneath your player will be... you guessed it... red! Oh, and there's the memory card slot just above the Z trigger. Save games, controller configurations and who knows what else.

Nintendo has reinvented the standard controller, just as they did with the SNES joystick. Sony claimed a controller revolution when it redid the SNES pad with a chunkier feel, smoother curves and a couple of extra two shoulder buttons. But Nintendo has stormed the Winter Palace and declared a people's republic with the finest controller ever made.

And why has *Super Play* chosen to lavish so much praise on the controller in this, our final issue? Simply because a good controller should be invisible to the player. It should be a natural thing – you're not meant to spot it and think "What an amazing controller!" You'll pick it up, love it and never notice it again. Because it just works and it's just right. Which is just as it should be.



The socket!

Plug in your removable memory packs here and take your save games with you.

The Z button

The trigger gives the controller a flight stick like feel.



The L & R buttons

Who says shoulder pads are going out of fashion?

Hold me!

The N64 controller is shaped with three separate handlebar grips, allowing three different hand positions...

Right Position

Holding the centre and right grips, this hold makes the most of the 3D stick. It's the one you'll use for *Mario 64* and racing games

Left Position

Using the centre and left grips. Allows control of the 3D stick and Z Trigger Button with the right hand and the control pad with the left. As used in *Blast Corps*.

Super NES Position

Holding the two outside grips, this traditional position allows total digital control of side scrolling action games, puzzle games and classical RPGs.



THE CONTROLLER IS FULL

And up the cable...

Four gorgeous controller sockets.

Memory Pack

(Underside.) Can be loaded into the controller to save a player's position and controller customisations. Take your settings anywhere!

Start button

Start and pause button, but boo hoo no select!

C Button Unit

Offers several different game play functions including switching camera perspective, character positioning, attacks and plenty of other actions. Buttons can also be used to position character, for example fielders in a baseball game

Controller: Nintendo 64
Hands: Allison's own

Cross pad

An eight directional joypad... just like on your SNES.

3D Control Stick

Allows for unprecedented, 360 degree game movement. Subtly enables characters to creep, walk, trot or sprint. In racing games, acceleration and turning are life-like.

Three handlebars

A demonic fork, offering three different special Kung Fu grips.

A and B buttons

These blue and green chapples simplify controls in simple games and allow you to play arcade beat-'em ups in the way the programmers always wanted you too.

Nintendo's revolutionary new controller combines both digital and analogue control mechanisms, alongside a cluster of action buttons.