

The History of Super Mario

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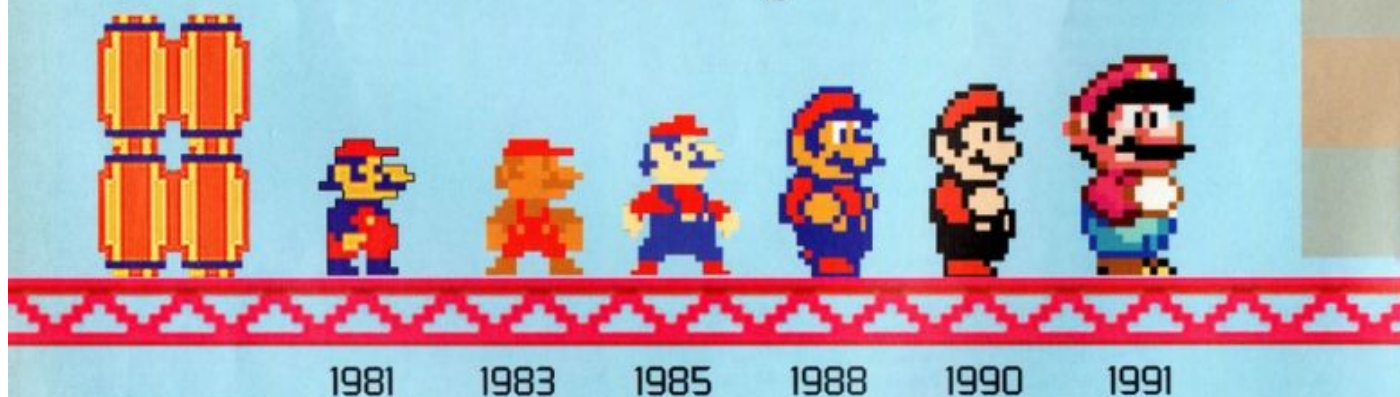
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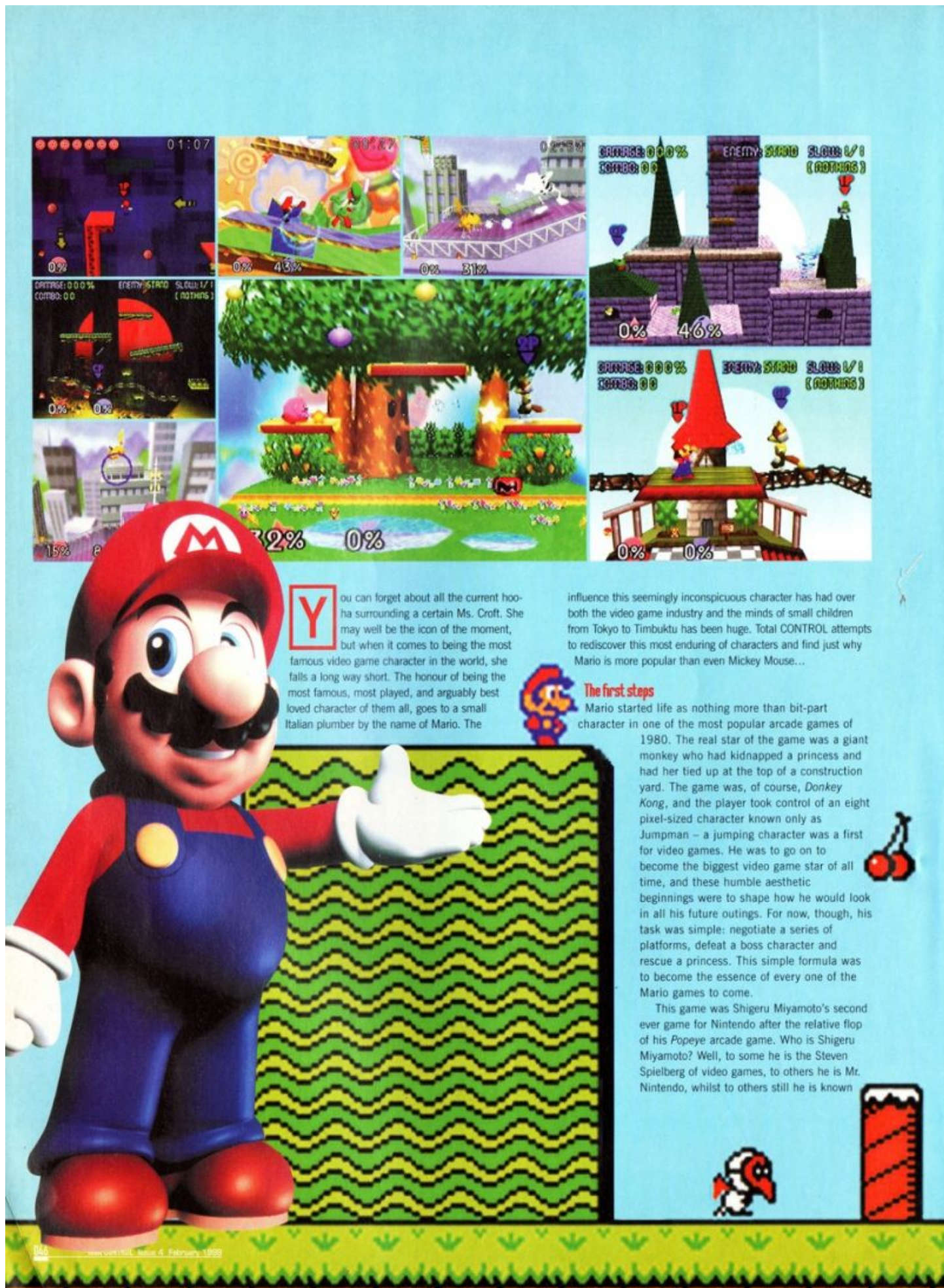
The History of Super Mario

...Or how to make some of the
best video games in history.





With **Nintendo's** announcement of three new **Mario-based** titles before the end of the year, Total CONTROL decided to take a **closer look at the history** of this industry's most enduring video game character...



You can forget about all the current hoo-ha surrounding a certain Ms. Croft. She may well be the icon of the moment, but when it comes to being the most famous video game character in the world, she falls a long way short. The honour of being the most famous, most played, and arguably best loved character of them all, goes to a small Italian plumber by the name of Mario. The

influence this seemingly inconspicuous character has had over both the video game industry and the minds of small children from Tokyo to Timbuktu has been huge. Total CONTROL attempts to rediscover this most enduring of characters and find just why Mario is more popular than even Mickey Mouse...

The first steps

Mario started life as nothing more than bit-part character in one of the most popular arcade games of 1980. The real star of the game was a giant monkey who had kidnapped a princess and had her tied up at the top of a construction yard. The game was, of course, *Donkey Kong*, and the player took control of an eight pixel-sized character known only as Jumpman – a jumping character was a first for video games. He was to go on to become the biggest video game star of all time, and these humble aesthetic beginnings were to shape how he would look in all his future outings. For now, though, his task was simple: negotiate a series of platforms, defeat a boss character and rescue a princess. This simple formula was to become the essence of every one of the Mario games to come.

This game was Shigeru Miyamoto's second ever game for Nintendo after the relative flop of his *Popeye* arcade game. Who is Shigeru Miyamoto? Well, to some he is the Steven Spielberg of video games, to others he is Mr. Nintendo, whilst to others still he is known



The contrast between the look of Mario on the SNES and Mario on the N64 is stark. Gameplay, however, remains remarkably similar

simply as 'Shigs'. To put it bluntly, Miyamoto has been responsible for umpteen of the biggest selling games in history (his credits include *Star Fox*, *Zelda* and *Metroid*, to name but a few) and without him Nintendo would not be the

into five level worlds – the final level of each world would see a confrontation with King Koopa (later to be known as Bowser) and, eventually, the end of the game would see a final battle with Koopa for the Princess. The game also

ARE THESE GAMES WORTHY TO FOLLOW IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF THE GREATS OR ARE THEY AN UNASHAMED ATTEMPT BY NINTENDO TO MAKE A FEW EXTRA BUCKS?

company they are today. We will go on to see how, through the Mario games, Miyamoto has made possibly the biggest contribution to the artform of video games in its brief history.

How did Mario's name come about? Well, according to Nintendo folklore, he was named after a New York warehouse manager, Mario Sengali. We'll never know the truth behind this, but it's kind of nice to think that there was a real person behind the character.

Brothers in arms

Mario's leading role debut, along with his brother Luigi, was in the arcade game *Mario Bros.* Quite unlike any of the later games, this was a single screen platformer where the objective was simply to score as many points as possible by killing the enemies emerging from two pipes at the top of the screen, and many of them went on to feature heavily in the later games. Killing the bad guys was a simple matter of either hitting the platform below them or jumping on their heads – are you beginning to see where the later stuff comes from? These two games contain the basic elements of all Mario games – platforms, killing enemies by jumping on their heads, boss characters and rescuing a princess.

The next step, where these two games came together, was in *Super Mario Bros.*, which appeared on Nintendo's first home console, the NES. Here was a sideways (from left to right) scrolling platformer which was divided up

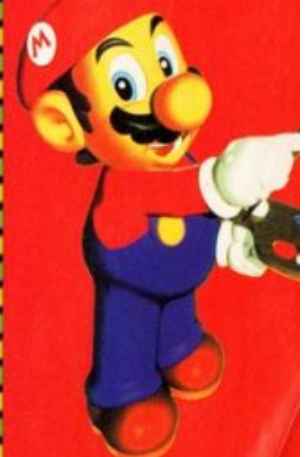
introduced the idea of secret areas, where a little exploration of the beaten path would see the player rewarded with extra lives and other bonuses. Other innovations included collection of 100 gold coins for an extra life (a feature copied by almost every platformer since), a points bonus for completing the levels quickly, and the system of a 'super' Mario (hence the name) where, by collecting a mushroom, our hero would grow twice the size and could withstand one hit from an enemy. There was also a power-up that transformed Mario into a fireman, and this idea of different abilities would be explored later on in the series.

The follow-up to this hugely successful game was, unsurprisingly, called *Super Mario Brothers 2*, and (in Japan at least) was more of the same thing – only ten times more difficult. In the US and Europe, however, this game was released as *The Lost Levels*. *Super Mario Bros. 2* was different kettle of fish entirely. This game originated from a Japanese platformer, only when it was released in the West, the central characters had been replaced by the Mario characters. In essence this was not a real Mario game, and the gameplay differed significantly from the first game. This was the first instance when Nintendo realised that Mario was big enough to sell a game off his own back.

The third game, and the true sequel to *Super Mario Bros.*, was the ground-

HE'S GOT A LOT OF CHARACTER

Mario's appeal does not just lie purely in the quality of the games, although this does play a large part. Perhaps the character himself plays a significant part to the appeal of the games – indeed, he displays some classic design, worthy of Disney. Classically stylised, with the large eyes, a round face and dressed in bright, primary colours, Mario displays all the qualities to endear him to children and adults alike. He offers no threat and, to the contrary, he represents fun. Mario is almost always depicted with a smile on his face.



MARIO VS. SONIC

In the days of the 16-bit console battles, Sonic the Hedgehog was Sega's main weapon against Nintendo's Mario, and the two were pitched in a platform character war to the death. This was one of the contributing factors to Sega's dominance in the US and Europe over arch rivals Nintendo. Although the Mario games are considered to be far superior to any of the Sonic games, it was perceived value – image – that was important. As much as Mario represented Nintendo with his rounded, fun, almost child-like qualities, the hedgehog epitomised Sega in those days: fast, streamlined and altogether more hip. But times change, and now the Mario games are considered far superior to Sega's recent efforts with the hedgehog. Will this all change with *Sonic Adventures* on Dreamcast?

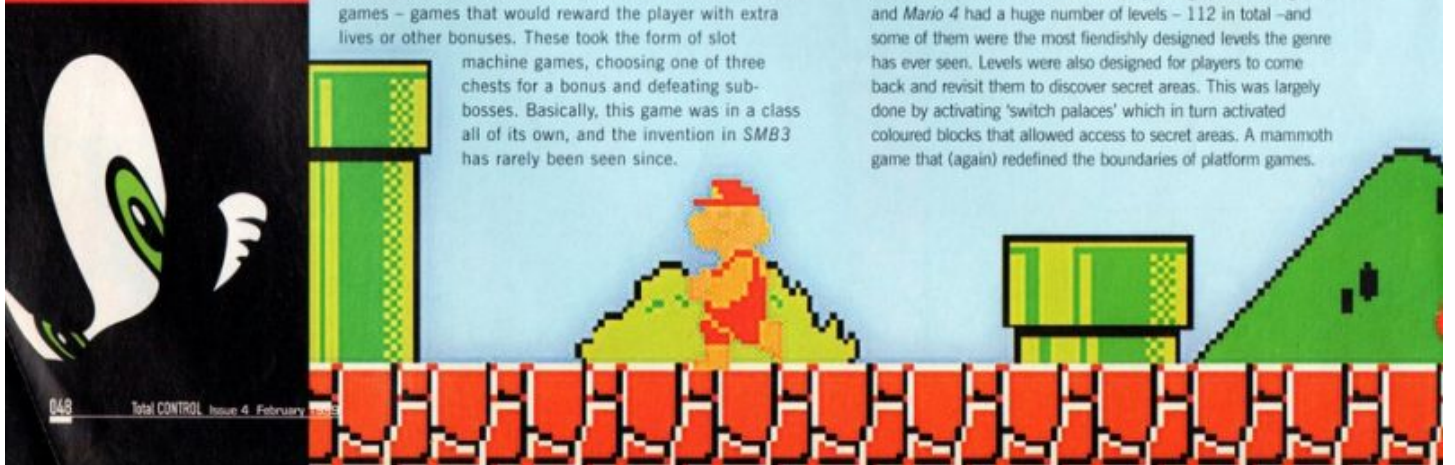
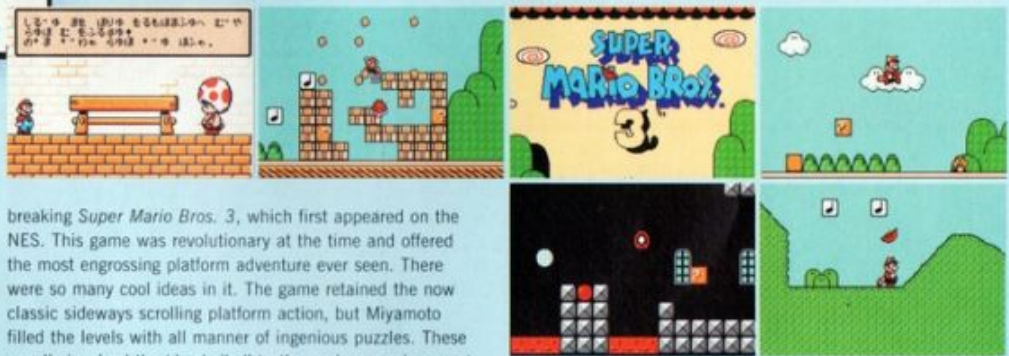
breaking *Super Mario Bros. 3*, which first appeared on the NES. This game was revolutionary at the time and offered the most engrossing platform adventure ever seen. There were so many cool ideas in it. The game retained the now classic sideways scrolling platform action, but Miyamoto filled the levels with all manner of ingenious puzzles. These usually involved the 'de-shelled' turtles and your subsequent use of that shell to destroy blocks to allow you to get to secret areas and gain extra power-ups. The game also encouraged exploration, and indeed some of the levels worked not only from left to right but also vertically. Some also challenged the player with levels that moved by themselves; players had to progress before the end of the level caught up with them.

This was also the first game that introduced the map idea, where all the levels in a particular world were placed on a map. This allowed the player to play levels in different orders, skip levels and take multiple routes to the boss castle. Also, on these maps were located many sub-games – games that would reward the player with extra lives or other bonuses. These took the form of slot machine games, choosing one of three chests for a bonus and defeating sub-bosses. Basically, this game was in a class all of its own, and the invention in *SMB3* has rarely been seen since.

The era of the SNES

One of the most important launch titles for the SNES was *Super Mario 4* (AKA *Super Mario World*). The platformer built on the solid foundations of the third game and then polished every one of that game's features and added a whole load of its own. *SMW* is still arguably the best ever 2D platformer, and it deserves to be played by anyone with a liking for such things.

Back came the map interface first seen in *SMB3*, but this was a more refined system that allowed players to discover secret areas. Multiple routes were also to play a large part in the game, and *Mario 4* had a huge number of levels – 112 in total – and some of them were the most fiendishly designed levels the genre has ever seen. Levels were also designed for players to come back and revisit them to discover secret areas. This was largely done by activating 'switch palaces' which in turn activated coloured blocks that allowed access to secret areas. A mammoth game that (again) redefined the boundaries of platform games.





Smash Bros uses all the famous (and infamous) Mario characters

As the sequel to the superlative *SMW*, *Yoshi's Island* certainly had its work cut out to live up to the reputation of its predecessors. Miyamoto still had a few feathers to his bow and introduced enough new ideas to make this game yet another classic in the series. For starters, players did not have direct control over Mario – this time he was a baby and a passenger on the back of Yoshi. The general idea of the game was to transport the tiny plumber across a number of levels to rescue Luigi from the clutches of Bowser. As an interesting take on the 'super' idea of having two hits before you die, your first 'hit'

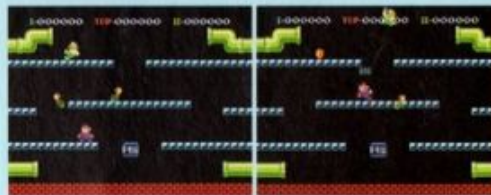


WORK HAS ONLY JUST BEGUN ON SMS4 2, AND IN MIYAMOTO'S WORDS, "WE ONLY HAVE MARIO AND LUIGI UP AND RUNNING AROUND ON SCREEN"

would launch baby Mario into the air, floating in a bubble. You then had a few seconds to recapture him before Bowser's minions would fly down and capture him.

Into three dimensions

It was at this point that the series branched off into the age of Nintendo 64. Mario returned as the central character in the 3D game and Yoshi carried the mantle of 2D in *Yoshi's Story*. Of course, what Miyamoto achieved with *Super Mario 64* is now consigned to history. It was the first successful 3D platformer that deserves to be viewed not only as a game but a great experiment in 3D. After all, many of the game's best features were already seen in *Mario 4* – the power-ups that changed our hero's abilities,



the secret areas and sub-games were all seen before in 2D form. The big attraction was (and still is) the look and feel of the game; for the first time players felt like they were taking part in a massive cartoon adventure. However, for some intangible reason *Mario 64* did not possess the same addictive qualities of

the 2D games, and players complained that the game became tedious when the set puzzles had been solved and all that remained was the collection of 20 red coins and 100 gold coins as the only tasks left to complete. Still, *Mario 64* remains arguably the best 3D platformer yet – only Rare's *Banjo-Kazooie* can claim to

have come close to emulating the joy that Miyamoto's game has given to millions.

Yoshi's Story continued the tradition of the Miyamoto platformer, only in a much-revised and economical way. That is to be kind to a game which should have been *SMW* for the N64 but was lacking in many departments, mostly because the game has less than thirty levels. The game can still boast the classic traits of a Miyamoto platformer and has some of the most wonderfully drawn visuals ever seen in a game of this genre. *Yoshi's Story* does have some delightful moments, but it is



I WANT TO BE MARIO = GAMES THAT HAVE TRIED TO COPY THE GREATEST

The sincerest form of flattery is copying, and if this is to be taken literally then Mario must be the most flattered video game character ever. These are some of the games that have tried (and failed) to emulate the success of Nintendo's man.

Zool – Gremlin



Croc – Fox Interactive



Gex 3D – Crystal Dynamics



DNC – Rare



MARIO = LICENCE TO PRINT MONEY

Nintendo were not slow to realise that their character was popular enough that if a game had an association with him then it would sell by the bucketload. This is a complete listing of Mario's video game appearances – cameo roles included.



1981 – The Donkey Kong Series (Arcade, NES)



1982 – Tennis (Arcade, NES)



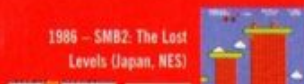
1983 – Mario Bros. (NES, Arcade)



1983 – Mario Pinball (NES)



Oct 1985 – Super Mario Brothers (NES, Arcade)



1986 – SMB2: The Lost Levels (Japan, NES)



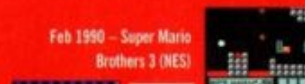
1988 – Mike Tyson's Punch Out!! (NES)



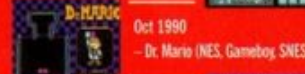
Aug 1988 – Super Mario Land (Gameboy)



Oct 1988 – Super Mario Brothers 2 (US, UK, NES)



Feb 1990 – Super Mario Brothers 3 (NES)



Oct 1990 – Dr. Mario (NES, Gameboy, SNES)



Aug 1991 – Super Mario World (SNES)



Nov 1992 – Mario Land 2 (Gameboy)



Even the bad guys are portrayed in the same way as Mario – round and fun



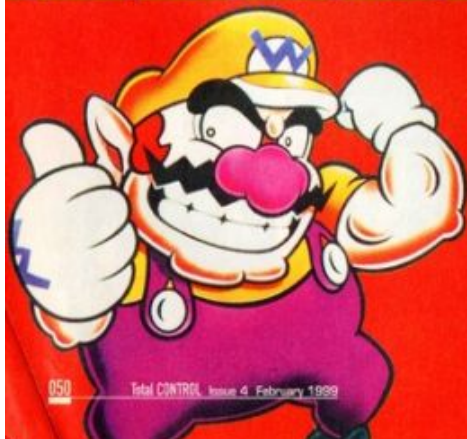
strangely easy and has little replay value. But then this game is not truly Miyamoto – a quick look at the credits is enough to confirm that he was only an executive producer of the game.

The future?

Now that *Zelda 64* has been finished, Miyamoto can turn his attention to what really will be the most anticipated video game of all-time, namely the sequel to *Super Mario 64*. However, it is not yet known what machine the game will eventually appear on. Because of the delays to *Zelda*, work has only just begun on the

game, and in Miyamoto's words, "We only have Mario and Luigi up and running around on screen". If the game takes two years to develop (about average for a Miyamoto game) then we may have to wait for the next Nintendo console to play it. *Super Mario 128* for a launch title on the Nintendo 2000 anyone?

Of course, the platformer is not the only genre of video game that Mario has appeared in. Who can forget the sublime *Super Mario Kart* on the SNES? A wonderful game in its own right and not at all related to the platform exploits of Mario and his chums. It would have sold even if Nintendo had made a bunch of nobodies as the main characters... but hey, if ain't broke and all that...



MIYAMOTO SPEAKS:

"I think that basically the point that we were focusing on with *SM64* – and this may or may not be a lesson to others – is that in the past, 3D games have been developed selfishly by the creators. We came at *SM64* from the other side and

tried to cater to the selfishness of the users and their desire for control, a good game camera, and ease of play. This was not a lesson for us, because we have known that this was the best way to do it since we first started experimenting with 3D using the FX chip for the

Super NES. So the *SM64* project was more of a reminder to us, and it reconfirmed that, as with all games, you have to cater to the users' desires. Also, we learned a lot while making *SM64* about the potential of the Nintendo 64 hardware itself. And while making the game, I discovered many points about the game's 3D engine that could be modified or improved. We didn't have time to implement these changes during *SM64*, but now, as we start work on the next games – *Zelda*, for example – we can complete a tune-up of the *SM64* system, and games like *F-Zero* can be a completely new version.

Miyamoto on how *Mario 64* has taught him a few things about 3D:

"I have noticed that a lot of kindergarten kids are better than I



Yoshi's Story could have been a *Super Mario World* for the N64 – it isn't

Super Mario 64 singlehandedly changed the way that people would use 3D in games. It has spawned many wannabes

One of the best games ever to feature Mario was *Super Mario RPG* - a game from Squaresoft which sadly never made it to Europe. Fortunately, that game's sequel looks certain to make it over here, and an interesting prospect it looks too. Essentially a 'kids' RPG, *Mario RPG 2* has the look of *PaRappa the Rapper* about it, with flat

developed-in-house, it has all the trademarks of a classic NCL game. As you might expect from Nintendo, *All-Star Smash Bros.* is not content to fall snugly into the convention of the beat-'em-up genre.

The game features Nintendo's most recognisable characters - Mario (obviously), Princess Peach, Donkey Kong, Link, Fox, McCloud, Luigi, Samus Aran (from the *Metroid* games) and Yoshi. Each has his or her

WITH THE LARGE EYES, A ROUND FACE AND DRESSED IN BRIGHT, PRIMARY COLOURS, MARIO DISPLAYS ALL THE QUALITIES TO ENDEAR HIM TO CHILDREN AND ADULTS ALIKE

cut-out characters in a three dimensional world. Expect it some time towards the end of the year.



The new Mario games

The latest batch of Mario-titled games follow the same path as *Mario Kart*. *Mario Party* is essentially a board game that features the characters from the platformers - you can find out more elsewhere in this issue. *Mario Golf* is pretty self-explanatory, and you can also find more details elsewhere. The most intriguing of the three is *All-Star Smash Bros.* - Nintendo's first attempt at a fighting game. Although the game is not being

strengths and special attacks, and these are remarkably different from a bog standard fighting game.

Are we to look on these new Mario games as worthy to follow in the footsteps of the greats or are they an unashamed attempt by Nintendo to make a few bucks off the most recognisable video game character in the world? Only time and the playability of these titles will tell if they can stand up for all that Mario represents: innovation, playability and, above all, pure, unadulterated fun.

am at playing *SM64* - so it seems that it has appealed to the younger audience."

Miyamoto on the response to *Mario 64*:

"In the 1980s, when we started on the original *Zelda* and *Super Mario Bros.*, we had the same kind of concepts for each game, so it's no wonder that the two series are converging and that *Super Mario 64* is approaching the *Zelda* concept. Even though the underlying structures of the two games are converging, emotionally I think that people will have different experiences with the two games. With *Zelda* you are supposed to be in a certain age, in a certain year in the past, and you are put into certain situations, and

you will feel, or even 'smell the air' and feel how 'warm' or 'cold' it is in the *Zelda* world. It will feel like a very different game."

Miyamoto on the similarities between *Mario* and *Zelda*:

"He was in *Mario 64* about half a year before completion, and we also planned to have him pop up in *Mario RPG*, but he 'disappeared' on the way. I'm sure that in the games to come we will meet this whimsical character again."

Miyamoto on UK-based developers Rare:

"Rare does great work. *Banjo-Kazooie* is so good and we can only

hope that the *Mario 64* sequel will be as complex. Rare is a good company, and I wish that we can make a game together some day."

Miyamoto on Luigi:

"Games will gradually evolve, thanks to strategies that make developers want to quickly continue on with their work. But how much fun will these games be? Up until now our strategy has been to make games as great looking as possible and to think things out while making the game. It's of the utmost importance to abide by this when making games. It's easy to forget this, but it's necessary when coming up with new games. These types of new inventions are the task at hand."