

## New Section

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It was Christmas Day 1998 and as I woke up and looked at my pile of presents there was only one shape I was looking for: one boxy shape that I had trained my eyes to recognize. The ceremonious unwrapping of the presents that has become a tradition in my family of (then) five culminated with the unveiling of my very own Nintendo 64. I had never owned and never played with a Playstation and I did not own a computer capable of running the latest games on the market: I had just unwrapped my entry ticket into true 3D.

I moved the Super Nintendo to a different shelf and placed the N64 in the spot of honor: right below the TV, sitting atop the VCR. Before even turning it on I gripped the controller: I already knew how to handle this pointy piece of plastic - I had read the reviews and understood the logic behind it, I had imagined I held it while looking at the magazines and had already come to peace with its magical asymmetry. Heck, I had even explained to my friends how to wield it without even having looked at the real thing myself. I was ready.

Super Mario 64 (referred to in this piece sometimes as just Mario 64), in true Nintendo fashion, came with the system. But it didn't just come with the system, it was the system. Concept and execution, means and end married in one cartridge full of magic. I placed the game in the cartridge slot, pushed it down and slid the power button. I gripped my asymmetrical controller and it gripped back just slightly, as if shaking my hand. Welcome, sir, it said, reassuring me that everything was OK, that we were together in this journey. And so it all began.

"It's-a-me! Maaario!"

Mario's face was there, taking the whole screen and looking at me, welcoming me to this new adventure. I was free to play with him, stretch his features, spin him around. And stretch and pull I did. Right from the start I understood that Mario was my partner - he does not mind you messing with him a bit, he understands you're in control; but whatever you do to him, however you interact with him, he will never stop being Mario. That became clear way before I even knew what this game was about.

And what the game was about I learned immediately afterward - not that it would have been too hard to imagine. True to traditional Mario

fashion, Bowser had kidnapped Princess Peach and trapped her in the Castle; so it was Mario's turn to progress through the different worlds where Bowser had hidden the Power Stars in order to reach the top of the castle and defeat him. The worlds in which the Stars were hidden could be accessed via enchanted paintings, which were strewn around the castle, and most of them were reminiscent of already existing worlds from previous Mario games: there's a water world, a Bob-omb world, a lava world, a cave and so on.

Thus you learn from the very start that the game is, at its backbone, a traditional Mario game. However, and this you don't know from the start but you certainly wish for it, it improves in all the right places so much that it redefines the whole Mario franchise, revamping it for the 3D era. The game stays very close to a lot of the elements that we all had come to associate with Mario games up to that point, some of which we have already touched on - such as a straightforward princess-kidnapping story and a clear, themed distinction between worlds (again, the water world, the desert world, the cave world, etc.). However, the new elements that it adds, most of which are founded on the old elements and readapted to the 3D world, are truly what make this game transcendent.

Back to 1998, then.

We had not yet fully entered the age of the tutorial, and so I still hadn't shed the habit of reading instruction manuals before playing games. This meant that as soon as I was let loose on the grounds of the castle, I made sure I made Mario try out every single move listed on that booklet - this would prove invaluable later, since Mario's repertoire of moves is truly extensive and versatile. Strangely, I found that all these moves, especially the long-jump and the backflip, came very naturally to me. Of course, we are talking about a set of moves which are all achieved with the combination of only three buttons (A, B, Z) plus a joystick, but still, from minute zero I knew the extent of Mario's abilities and felt, no pun intended, in control.

As the game progressed, these moves always stayed with me and were very rarely conditioned by any external elements. I felt like I could have beaten anyone in the whole world in a duel of long-jumps, like every surface was inviting a wall-jump and that I could acrobatically hop from pole to pole for hours. Almost the whole set of ways in which I could interact with the game was defined for me very early on, and it did an amazing job at keeping the boundaries clear. I could measure a gap and deem it long-jumpable or not, and that measure would stay true for the duration of the game. The language through which I communicated with

the game stayed true throughout the whole experience, and that made my connection with the world strong from the very beginning - and it only got progressively stronger.

The result was that almost ten years later when I picked up Super Mario Galaxy, having skipped every other Mario game since 64, the first thing I did when given control of Mario was a long-jump. Then a backflip. Then I smiled the smile of nostalgia. Those controls stayed, and will stay, with me forever. Even now, as I replay Super Mario 64 while writing this piece, I feel how the N64 controller easily slips into my hands and begs me to long- and triple-jump this life away.

And part of what makes the controls of Mario 64 so special is that they support a theme of style that has been with the Mario franchise since the very beginning. Mario games, always so right when it comes to the jumping, the running and the stomping, have always encouraged players to have fun with Mario's moves. And the controls are only half of it, since the games invariably provide for an environment where having fun is not only allowed, but encouraged.

Back in the original Super Mario Bros. we saw how bouncing off several enemies in a row granted Mario a bonus and how grabbing a Star power-up prompted the player to run through a level like an invincible bullet. The following Mario games kept reinforcing this concept to the point where it became part of the Mario culture. I may be wrong for thinking everyone will relate to this, but I remember fondly how when I defeated any of the Koopa children in Super Mario Bros. 3 I would take a precise position so I could grab the falling scepter before it hit the floor. It made absolutely no difference in terms of gameplay, but I wanted to play with style and the game was giving me the opportunity to do so.

With Mario 64 it's a way bigger deal. The game provides more than 15 different levels for the player to have fun in - not levels, but playgrounds if you may - each with a different environment that foments freedom of movement in a particular way. Access to so many different jumping styles means that every player will reach for a ledge in their own way (I will always favor the backflip) and, with time, they will even start navigating the worlds with their own style. The only thing that saddens me a little bit about Mario 64's controls, and that didn't register with me back in the day, is that Mario does not automatically grab on to a ledge when he falls while walking and he also seems to be missing some milliseconds of gratuitous air time once in a while when jumping off ledges; these are conventions that came to the genre with time and that become evident when revisiting an older classic.

Super Mario 64, then, took the concept of style to an entirely new level. And a big part of how it did so was by introducing the concept of freedom. Not only is level design in the game non-linear but it is also open-ended. Players are dropped into a level with only a four- or five-word hint of how to get a given Star and then are left to explore the level at their leisure, free to look for the hinted Star - or any other, for that matter. As I said before, levels in the game are more playgrounds than anything else, encouraging the player to be curious and playful, to explore the level's nook and crannies and to interact with it in any way they can think of. The non-linearity of the level design combined with the infinite possibilities of style for controlling Mario give way to a truly memorable experience that feels pretty much like, well, just playing.

The concepts of freedom and style are the driving force behind the game and, in my humble opinion, the two pillars on which it was built. It really feels like mostly every other element in the game supports these pillars in some way, thus generating a strong experience that feels constantly joyful and fresh. Earlier in the piece I mentioned how Mario 64 concentrated on improving the already existing elements of Super Mario games, and I think this is the case with freedom and style as well. I believe that they feel natural within the progression of Super Mario games.

By reshaping the traditional elements that make up any Mario game and putting them to the service of freedom and style, Nintendo managed to craft a well-rounded and consistent game, and if we take a look at some of these elements we will quickly realize how they have evolved from previous Mario games and how they support the new themes. Let's take, for example, the music and sound of the game. A lot of the music consists of a re-imagining of the music from the older games, which clearly hints at a desire to keep the same atmosphere. However, where the sound really strikes us as exceptional is through the sound effects, particularly Mario's voice. While Mario's jumps were traditionally accompanied by simple boings, Mario 64 introduces Mario's own voice to go with every jump and move. And while you could expect each physical action to be accompanied by grunts or other visceral noises, Mario actually screams with joy and excitement when he jumps around, even letting out an inspired yipee when you pull off a triple-jump. This is a clear indicator of how the player is always encouraged to have fun: Mario is obviously having fun, so nothing should stop the player from doing the same. Not only that, but when Mario gets hurt, burnt or falls from a considerable height he lets out a comical scream, and when he runs out of power during a level, he gets thrown out of it and lands on the floor with

a reflective Mamma mia! You only need to listen to Mario for mere seconds to realize that what you should be doing is jumping around, bouncing off walls, trying crazy moves, playing with style... in other words, having fun.

Another element that is a staple of Mario games is progression through levels, which tend to be smaller parts of bigger worlds. Mario 64 keeps the levels-and-worlds concept intact while at the same time completely turning it on its head. Worlds in Mario 64 are represented by paintings, and levels by the different Stars that Mario may find in a given painting. However, where the levels used to be traditionally discreet and very well defined, Mario 64 makes them all coexist within the one world thus giving the player the power to choose which level to complete, or which Star to find, within the world. And just as players have always had the chance to skip some worlds and levels in previous Mario games, the players are not required to visit all worlds and levels in Mario 64 - only enough to collect a minimum of Stars required to face Bowser. Thus we can see how the one element that fosters freedom and style the most within the game is actually pretty much in line with the design of the previous Mario games.

Something else that stays true to the Mario traditions, while still supporting the pillars of Super Mario 64, are the different suits that Mario dons during the game. While Mario suits started as mere power-ups like the power flower or the star, they evolved elegantly until they became an integral part of the Mario experience. Already in Super Mario Bros. 3 we saw how the leaf power-up enabled Mario to discover several secrets by allowing him to fly, in the same way that the frog suit let the player control Mario underwater with greater precision in order to not only make water levels easier to complete, but also allow him to find secrets underwater. This current of power-ups for exploration was continued during Super Mario World and brought to a climax in Mario 64, where the three available suits plus other smaller power-ups let Mario explore the marvels of the 3D world.

The main power-ups in Mario 64 are the Wing Cap, which lets Mario fly freely, the Metal Cap, which lets Mario walk on the bottom of the water and bypasses the need to breathe in that condition, and the Vanish Cap, which lets Mario traverse some obstacles. Additionally, Mario may ride on Koopa shells to avoid getting burnt or frozen by lava or icy water as well as ride whirlwinds, grab a ride on birds or grab onto jumping blocks. And what do all of these have in common? Well, they enable exploration and provide Mario with means to access new sections of the

environments. Power-ups in the game are not about making Mario stronger, but rather about providing the player with tools to enhance the exploration of the different worlds. Moreover, the only way to access these power-ups is by deeply exploring the castle, in order to activate some of them, one must find the special switches hidden within the castle walls. By supporting exploration, a byproduct of freedom and style, the Mario suits support the same pillars we have mentioned before.

It is truly impressive to see how most of the core elements of Mario 64 can be traced back to an older Super Mario game. However, there is no recycling going on here - this is no doubt a complete evolution of the elements which had made Mario what it was until that point. The ubiquitous coins are there in Mario 64, with two Stars in every level being connected to them. The seemingly irrelevant but immensely fun secrets hidden in the levels of older Mario games (crouching for five seconds on top of the white block, anyone?) are also there, with some special spots sprouting hidden 1-Up mushrooms or some inconspicuous places serving as teleportation spots. The enemies are all there, cleverly redesigned to fit the 3D world. And the impressive feedback is there, with Mario celebrating his successes along with the player. However, all of these elements are so intelligently redesigned that at first glance you might miss all the similarities altogether.

This is Mario 64 as seen through my eyes. It is not something I realized back in 1998, when all I could do was stare, baffled, at the screen. Back then I saw a huge mass of fun and gave into it without even thinking about what I was doing. But as the years passed, and especially after sucking every last ounce of fun out of Super Mario Galaxy, I revisited the N64 classic. First I did it unconsciously, in my head, listing it always along with Goldeneye and Ocarina of Time as one of the three N64 games that changed my life forever. But then I forced myself into analysis: I took the N64 controller, re-hooked the box, borrowed the game from my cousin ("where did my copy go!? Ja, can I borrow your copy? I swear swear nothing bad will happen to it") and forced myself to find what I liked about it so much. What happened was that connections were remade in my brain - not only with Mario 64 memories, but with the whole Mario franchise. I saw the green numbers, as Neo would say, and I understood that the N64 masterpiece was just the sum of all of its predecessors. And then some. Then I attempted to narrow the genius of the game down to its core elements in order to write this piece, at which

point it all took shape in my head. What I found at the very core I could only translate as freedom and style.

The combination of those strong pillars plus the reinvention of the elements that had made the franchise successful to that point made this one of those rare games where it all just fits. A rock solid game. This is not a game that leaves you thinking about that one moment, nor a game that has that one thing that sets it apart. This is one of those other rare games, the ones you enjoy from start to finish and when you're done you smile and feel like you have made a new friend. Hey there, game, we should totally hang out later.

And, as with friends, there comes a time when you must move on. To other games, to other platforms, to other genres. To other lives, to other cities. But when you meet again, in your living room, in your cousin's house or walking on the street, you immediately hug each other and remember all those fond times you spent together. You sit down and start sharing stories over drinks as if you had last seen each other only yesterday, and you feel a tinge of nostalgia as you reach into the past for your memories together and relive them for old times' sake.