

SUPER MARIO BROS. 2

GENRE(S): Platformer

AVAILABLE ON: Arcade, NES

DEVELOPED BY: Nintendo

PUBLISHED BY: Nintendo

RELEASED: September 30, 1988 (NES)

Super Mario Bros. 2, as we know it, has a long and complicated history. In the wake of the first *Super Mario Bros.* game's release, Nintendo branched out to the U.S., where the console game market was just beginning to recover from the 1983 Atari fiasco which almost destroyed the business as a whole. Upon first laying hands on Shigeru Miyamoto and Takashi Tezuka's *Super Mario Bros. 2*, Nintendo of America refused to localize the game, because not only was it too similar to the first game, but also difficult beyond compare, which made it near-impossible to sell. As the producer and director already had their hands full with other projects at the time – including the behemoth known as *Super Mario Bros. 3* – they came up with a unique solution to provide the Western market with their very own "version" of the game.

A Famicom Disk System game called *Yume Kōjō: Doki Doki Panic*, also produced by Shigeru Miyamoto and developed by Kensuke Tanabe in 1987, was shipped to America for evaluation whether this very strange platformer set in a maze-like world and revolving around four characters, all with their special sets of abilities, could pass as a Mario game. As fundamentally different as it was, the game was greenlit to be converted as the Western iteration of *Super Mario Bros. 2*, which wasn't released in Japan until 1992. Although it has continued to divide fans to this day, even before its developmental history or the existence of a "genuine" *Super Mario Bros. 2* became public knowledge in Western territories, the game is a landmark platformer; an early showcase of brand diversity, and a starting point for many recurring elements and characters of the Mario franchise.

Mario, Luigi, Toad and Princess Toadstool (identified throughout the game as just "Princess") all dream

the same dream about a mysterious door leading into the dreamland of Subcon. A frog-like creature named Wart has emerged and imprisoned all of the realm's inhabitants, declaring himself king. The next day, the foursome goes on a picnic and discovers the door from their mutual dream. Without hesitation, they set out to free Subcon from Wart's tyranny together.

There was a time I was absolutely obsessed with this game, because it was the only Mario game I never owned on the NES (before 2013, I believe...), and also the only Mario game I never beat on the NES. It wasn't until the arrival of *Super Mario All-Stars* on the SNES that I finally got the game and completed it, but felt that I had somewhat cheated destiny by beating an easier version. I grew even more obsessed with it. In time, I realized that the reason behind some people's disdain towards the game is the main reason why I like it so much: it was so different, such a unique experience. It remains perhaps the weirdest Mario platformer to this day; I guess no one's bothered to make another one like it since Japan has very little love for the game. They even renamed the game "*Super Mario USA*" when it was finally released back there. It probably isn't supposed to be an offensive title, but it has a certain ring to it.

Super Mario Bros. 2 features levels that progress into all different directions. Unlike in the first game, you can run back and forth all you want, and in the later indoor levels it sometimes even feels like you're playing *Metroid*, simply trying to find your way forward. There are levels where you go up, there are levels where you go down – and even a level where you must hack your way to the end, then hitch a ride on a flying enemy all the way back to the beginning to be able to complete it. Every world has a specific theme, ranging from ice (eww), to quicksand, all the way to walking on clouds. The first six worlds of Subcon have three levels each, and World 7 has two – which are perfectly enough, I assure you.

As you'll find out two seconds into the game, jumping on enemies doesn't do anything. You just land on their back. The environment is littered with things you can lift and throw, and all of these types of items can be used as weapons, including the enemies themselves. You have two health points at the start of each level; if you happen to find a magic bottle and smash it on the ground at the exact right location, a

doorway to a mirror dimension might lead you to a Super Mushroom, which gives you an extra health point for the remainder of the level. Each root you pluck from the ground while in this mirror dimension turns into a coin, which you can use in the slots minigame between levels for a chance to gain an extra life or two. Collecting five cherries summons a Starman to float across the screen, giving you brief invincibility as before. The mushrooms, coins, Starman, the POW block from the original *Mario Bros.*, well hidden warp zones, and there you pretty much have it, everything this game has in common with the games that came before. Oh, and of course, a heavily rewritten version of the underwater theme from *Super Mario Bros.* as the game's title tune.

Each level in the game ends with a miniboss fight against Ostro (renamed Birdo in later games, after an unrelated creature in this game), who, uh, is some kind of a crossed breed between a dinosaur and a bird, and looks a bit like an early prototype of Yoshi. The most usual way to beat her is to grab the eggs she spits at you in mid-air and hurl them back at her three times, then grab the "key" (that looks like a football) and enter the ominous gateway that opens afterwards to make it to the next level – or, the world boss. There are a total of five completely different bosses in the game, including Wart himself. That's quite a feat, considering the previous game had Bowser and seven lookalikes.

Super Mario Bros. 2 features four playable characters; you can choose any one of them between each level. Each character besides the everyman Mario has a special ability. Luigi can jump higher than any of the other characters, and his jumps have incredible hangtime which make timing – an extremely important element of the core gameplay – hard as hell. However, this ability of his might make him a good choice for levels where you mostly ascend, due to the fact that you don't necessarily need to sit down as cannon fodder to charge the super jump, which is a common ability for all the characters, or stack as much stuff for a makeshift ladder as the others. Toad's special ability is a lot more subtle; his movement speed and agility aren't affected by carried items in any way, and he can pick stuff up faster than the others – making him essential in desert-themed levels where you have to dig through enormous piles of sand all the while hounded by an increasing amount of enemies. Finally, we have the Princess, who – as we all know – in all

of her pink and girly glory, is the absolute best character in the game. She can use her dress to glide for a surprisingly remarkable distance on a straight track.

It sounds dangerously technical, especially for a game that was converted from an advanced system like the Famicom Disk System to the NES, and yes, even though some downgrades obviously had to be and were made, Nintendo perhaps overlooked some things in their hurry to get this game out in the U.S. before *Super Mario Bros. 3* hit Japanese stores, to avoid any more confusion. The sidescrolling indeed works both ways, and the game is extremely quick to respawn enemies. Just five moving sprites on the screen at the same time can and will result in an extreme drop in the frame rate. This isn't a huge problem until the final two levels, in which five is practically the minimum amount of enemies you have to deal with at the same time, and most of those enemies you can't do shit against since they're living hazards in themselves. Since Wart's castle in the clouds is a gigantic maze, the technical difficulties you'll most probably have to experience once you finally make it there, plus the sensitive control scheme, will have you contemplating feeding the game to a trash compactor. Well, at least you have a few chances to continue the game, and you'll get used to all of its quirks soon enough.

It's not a technically perfect game, as one might have expected, and I have to admit that after all these years, I'm starting to realize some of the problems people have with this game, especially their frustrations with certain types of sequences that repeat periodically throughout the game. Yet still, I stand behind it, and my age-old obsession with this specific piece of the NES treasury. Lest we forget: it's ours. There was a time we Westerners got our very own Mario game. It's our precious, even with its relatively small difficulties.

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