

Judging Between Archrivals

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The holiday season brings a rich variety of video game paraphernalia for connoisseurs and amateurs alike. The big news is Nintendo's belated entry into the 16-bit market with the Super Nintendo Entertainment System (\$200). Nintendo's footdragging let archrival Sega grab a substantial market lead for its Genesis system (\$150), making for some real competition in the home video game market. It's about time.

The Super NES comes with Super Mario World, starring you-know-who in the most sophisticated home video game ever produced. Not only does the game have a dizzying number of nooks and crannies, each with its own visual theme and music, but it lays them out in a wonderfully non-linear fashion, so you can go in and out of various adventures without following a predetermined path. An allegory for life itself.

The graphics on Super Mario World, as on all games for the Super NES, are better than life, with crisp color and a three-dimensional feel. The digitized music (using a Sony chip) is quite spectacular, but you need a TV with stereo speakers to get the most out of it. The average player will spend well over 50 hours finishing Super Mario World—and even then will find new areas to explore. A lithium battery preserves your progress, so you can work at the game a little bit at a time.

Among our other family favorites is Final Fight (Capcom \$60), a brawling game that doesn't take itself too seriously. Our hero slugs his way through an endless horde of thugs and bullies of both sexes and all ethnic backgrounds, in a gallant effort to rescue the mayor's daughter from the Mad Gear Gang. The action is as realistic as any arcade game, and the oomphs and ouches are strictly for laughs. My favorite part is when our hero, wielding a metal pipe, comes across a dream-mobile belonging to one of the bad guys. If you manage to pound the car into scrap in 30 seconds, the baddie stumbles onto the screen and bursts into tears.

Some other sure-fire hits for the Super NES: Gradius III (Konami \$55) and U.N. Squadron (Capcom \$60) are arcade quality flying/shooting games that test your skill by filling the screen with a blizzard of flying, pelting, grasping objects.

F-Zero (Nintendo \$50), a racing game, and Pilotwings (Nintendo \$50), a flight simulator, show off the Super NES's unique ability to rotate the picture on screen, creating the effect of a sudden camera sweep. And Castlevania IV, just out from Konami (\$60), has some of the most dramatic visual effects of any home video game.

Packed with the Sega Genesis (Nintendo's nemesis), is Sonic the Hedgehog, a game which shows off the Genesis's lightning-quick microprocessor. Our hero is a colorful, somewhat cutesy rodent who runs around in sneakers at, well, sonic speed. The graphics are as crisp as those of the best Super NES games, but the game lacks Nintendo's most advanced effects: There are fewer moving objects on the screen,

the backgrounds are flatter and the sound is not nearly as complex or varied. Sonic is a linear game, lacking the subtlety and intricacy of Super Mario World. The Genesis itself is a fine machine, featuring a headphone jack, which lets you tap into the stereo sound with mini-speakers.

Other very good games for the Genesis are Arcus Odyssey (Renovation \$70), Marvel Land (Namco \$60), Onslaught (Ballistic \$50) and Columns (Sega \$30), a Tetris-type puzzle-game. Genesis has by far the larger game library, but Nintendo is working hard to catch up.

At the same time, Nintendo is also continuing to license a large variety of games for its original 8-bit system. The Game Genie (Galoob \$50) helps you get more play out of your old Nintendo by endowing the game characters with more lives, greater powers and the like. The Game Genie's release was delayed while Nintendo and Galoob were having their own version of Final Fight in the courts. Nintendo worries that the Game Genie will ruin the challenge of game play, but the device is a godsend to those of us too klutzy to reach the more advanced levels on our own. Our boys went digging through their scrapheap of abandoned Nintendo games and, with the help of the Game Genie, played them all over again.

Avoiding Nintendo's myopia, Sega is working with Galoob to produce a Genesis Game Genie—which may be reason enough to choose Genesis over Super NES.

This year has also seen a revolution in the hand-held videogame market, previously dominated by Nintendo's Game Boy (\$90). Despite the Game Boy's huge popularity, I have always considered it a dud. It has a teeny-weeny black-and-gray LCD screen that leaves you with a permanent squint. Worse still, the backplate latch seems designed to be broken off by little hands or stepped on by little feet (we've lost half a dozen of them). Fortunately, the Game Boy has been overtaken by several first-rate competitors. Both the Lynx Deluxe (Atari \$130) and the Game Gear (Sega \$150) offer brilliant color on screens much larger than the Game Boy's, and both support an impressive library of popular titles. (In a thoughtful nod to left-handed players, the Lynx lets you flip the controls.)

The Turbo Express (NEC \$300) is pricey but has the advantage of using the same game cartridges as the Turbogرافx 16 (NEC \$100), a full size 16-bit system that's been successful in Japan but seems to have flopped here. The Game Gear and Turbo Express can be converted into mini-TV receivers for an extra \$120.

Finally, a word about Miracle, an electronic keyboard from Software Toolworks that plugs into the Nintendo (\$300) or the Super NES (\$400—better graphics), and offers on-screen piano lessons. Miracle has a lot more patience—and is a lot more fun—than my third-grade piano teacher. It's also a much better piano player.

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