

Trouble in Super Marioland

By ALEX KOZINSKI

It was a scene that would have warmed the hearts of the Nintendo board of directors: The family sat transfixed watching nine-year-old Jimmy, hero of the movie "The Wizard," sweep the final round of the Nintendo World Cup competition while, on a separate screen, Dad was struggling frantically to subdue level 8/4 of "Tetris." But such golden Nintendo moments are getting rarer these days. Despite Nintendo's aggressive marketing efforts—"The Wizard," for example, looks like a thinly disguised infomercial on the joys and benefits of Nintendo—it is clear that the home video game giant has lost some of its luster.

You don't have to see Nintendo's balance sheet to sense trouble in Super Marioland. There are telltale signs that the public's passion for this love-child of the television set and the computer chip may be cooling:

- The video-games aisle at the Toys 'R' Us often is deserted. Until recently, this was a bustling marketplace of ideas where scores of cognoscenti met to swap vital game information. Today you're lucky if you run into somebody who knows a Jelectro from a Para-Goomba. In the past, cartridge racks marked "WE'RE OUT. MORE ON THE WAY!" stood as mute testimony to the carnage wrought by mad-dened shoppers in search of the latest video thrill; today such signs are few and far between.

- The Game Boy—Nintendo's plunge into the hand-held video game market—timed to make a splash last Christmas, made only a ripple. Supplies of the game, widely expected to be snatched off the shelves by December, held up just fine.

- The Power Pad—a plastic mat that turns your Nintendo into an electronic aerobics machine—has faltered for lack of supporting software. Other attachments, such as Mattel's super-sophisticated Power Glove, are going begging.

- A player recently called the Nintendo Hotline (206-885-7529)—which offers advice and news about current and soon-to-be released games—and got through on the first try. Repeated busy signals and half-hour waits were the rule only a few months ago.

•My eight-year-old son, Yale—the most serious Nintendo player in a family of Nintendo junkies—recently was heard to say: "Not another Nintendo cartridge, Dad. How about a backgammon set instead?"

While it's far too early to count Nintendo out of the home video game market—after all, millions of American households own Nintendo machines—it is worth trying to figure out what went wrong. The answer, I suspect, is that Nintendo has become the victim of its own success. Nintendo controls virtually every aspect of production, marketing and distribution of its games; it maintains an orderly market.

But is it too orderly?

The games marketed over the past couple of years have taken on a monotonous uniformity; prices have shot up mercilessly; and consumer services have eroded. The lesson here may be that a planned economy—even a privately planned one—sows the seeds of its own destruction.

In the beginning, Nintendo games were exciting and reasonably priced. What still are some of the most innovative game cartridges were released during Nintendo's first two years, at prices from \$20 to \$40. "Super Mario Brothers," "Zelda," "Metroid," "Kid Icarus," "Wrecking Crew," "Solomon's Key," "World Runner," "Klu-Klu Land," "Rygar," "Legacy of the Wizard": All of these, and another handful released between 1986 and 1988, reflected ingenious efforts at creating games with unique feel, graphics and concept. At about \$30, they were a darn good entertainment value.

Nintendo games now start at \$40 and run up to about \$75. Worse still, interesting new games are rare as hens' teeth. Many "new" games mimic not only the concept but also the music and graphics of earlier ones. Nintendo's most recent offering, "Final Fantasy," for example, is a rehash of "Ultima" and "Dragon Warrior." It seems like the only really novel game Nintendo has released in a couple of years is the aforementioned "Tetris," a game invented in the Soviet Union that's so exciting and challenging it's instantly addictive.

The lack of innovation and diversity in a medium that is constrained only by the imagination of the programmer and the skill of the graphic artist is surprising. The reason may be that Nintendo's careful filtering process allows production of only those games it approves of. Having to satisfy the Nintendo censor might well chill the creativity of potential game producers.

Nintendo also has ham-handedly interfered with normal retailer-customer relations. In the good old days, if you took your Nintendo product home and it didn't work, you could get an exchange from your retailer, just as with most other consumer products. No more. I recently tried to return a defective game cartridge and was advised that Nintendo prohibits such exchanges: "They won't take 'em back from us, so we get stuck with them. If you have a problem send the defective product to Nintendo in Redmond, Washington." Well, good luck. Video-game players definitely are into instant gratification, not this mail-and-wait routine. Most manufacturers can't push retailers and consumers around like this, but when you're the Donkey Kong of the business, maybe you can get away with it.

No doubt, Nintendo has what it thinks are fine business reasons for its strategy, but the bottom line is that the lack of effective competition may have made it fat and flabby. Maybe they'll pull it out, maybe they won't. In the meantime, my sons and I will be playing a bit of backgammon, as we wait for the situation to clear up.

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