Playstation and More Immersive Video Games: Crash Course Games #9

Crash Course: Games
https://youtube.com/watch?v=yq2n11aPvog
https://nerdfighteria.info/v/yq2n11aPvog

Hi, I'm André Meadows and this is Crash Course Games. As you'll remember from last time, by the mid-90s Nintendo and Sega were in the midst of a war for console dominance and, and their struggle to outdo each other were driving improvements in hardware, games and all-around user experience. The video game industry was worth around $19 billion in 1993 and that kind of money is likely to attract the attention of an even bigger company than Sega and Nintendo.

Enter Sony, a pretty well-known Japanese electronics company that had, like, $36 billion in total revenue in 1993. Sony was about to enter the console market with the PlayStation. That unassuming grey box was about to disrupt pretty much everything in home consoles.

[intro music]

So the second round of the Console War between Nintendo and Sega was still in full swing in 1994. We'll get to Sony's role in a bit, but I just want to point out that there were some other consoles that tried to take part in the Console War but just didn't get in there. Sorry, TurboGrafx-16.

And remember Atari? They tried too. They made their last stand in the console market in 1993 with the Jaguar in an attempt to take a technological leap past their competition. The Atari Jaguar was technically a 32-bit system but it had two significant problems. It was really difficult for programmers to write games for it, and it had this totally bizarre controller design with a numeric keypad. You can almost feel the Intellivision and ColecoVision controllers looking at it and going, "Really?" Very few developers made games for the Jaguar and few people wanted to play the games that did get made which wasn't great for sales.

Now, processing power wasn't the only technology game companies were pushing for. Most of the industry was looking toward the relatively new data storage format -- compact disks. They may seem quaint now in the age of streaming and the death of physical meaning and all but in the 1990s, CDs were amazing. And these plastic compact disks could hold a lot more data than a game cartridge. I mean a LOT more. For example, a standard Sega cartridge held somewhere between four and five megabytes of data. A CD-ROM could hold over seven hundred megabytes. And it had lasers!

Sega was first to market with the 1992 North American release of their Sega CD add-on for the Genesis. And their rush to get it released showed. It was criticized for its high price, its lack of quality games and the fact that the new massive storage capacity was mostly just used to add grainy video sequences rather than improving gameplay. But don't blame Sonic CD for that, okay? Sonic CD was cool. It gave us Metal Sonic.

Despite the problems with the Sega CD, the company tried again to make a technological leap without introducing a new console in 1994, when they launched the 32X add-on. It was an attempt to be first to market with 32-bit processing but the 32X faced a lot of the same criticism the Sega CD had. Poor games, a high price, and a sense that the peripheral really didn't add much to the experience made the 32X a commercial failure. The Sega CD and the 32X foreshadowed Sega's hardware struggles in the industry.

But Sega had a pretty good reason to rush these products to market. As we mentioned earlier, the consumer electronics giant Sony was about to enter the video game market and Sega was correctly worried that this would weaken their sales. Sony had been in the background of the game industry for a few years and had tentatively partnered with Nintendo in 1998 to help develop a CD-ROM peripheral for the Super Nintendo. That drive was never released and the two companies had a big fight about Nintendo flirting with Sony's competition, Philips, and they had a terrible break-up. And Sony said, "Fine, we'll go make our own CD-based video game console, and it'll be better than any console you ever made, Nintendo!" And that's just what they did. Let's go to the Thought Bubble.

In 1994, Sony debuted their 32-bit PlayStation. Prior to launch, Sony developed strong relationships with third party developers like Namco and Konami to ensure the console would have great games. Their design featured technological innovations which were miles ahead of Sega and Nintendo's consoles.

The CD-ROM drive was essential to the console's success. The CD-ROMs weren't quite as fast as the flash memory-based cartridges but their massively increased storage capacity gave developers the space to combine detailed pre-rendered backgrounds with polygon-based foreground graphics to create immersive experiences unlike anything gamers had seen on console.

But the downside of the move to CD storage was in transfer speeds. These early CD drives were considerably slower than cartridge-based games. and it could take a long time for a large level of the game to load into the system memory. This was the birth of the load screen. The PlayStation also emphasized the then-new technology of the polygon-based 3D graphics. These powerful graphics processors allowed developers to create worlds with depth and, at their best, gave players the opportunity to look around and see a sort of fully realized world.

These blocky characters made of thousands of triangles might look clunky and primitive to us now but at the time, they were revolutionary. Watching the perspective of the game change as the in-game camera spun around your character was an unusual and exciting experience for players in the 90s.

A smaller innovation, both in terms of size and impact on the industry, was the memory card. The PlayStation didn't have internal storage to save games. Instead, it used a small memory card which allowed players to save their progress but also made those same games portable. Want to show your friend how far you've gotten in Tomb Raider? You could take your saved game with you when you went to your friend's house. Thanks, Thought Bubble.

These technical advantages allowed the PlayStation to quickly take the lead in a market full of outdated consoles. But Sega and Nintendo didn't stand still. Sega released its 32-bit Saturn console in 1995. It's beautiful, isn't it? But it didn't manage to recapture much market share from Sony. The console mainly suffered from a lack of compelling games. Sega rushed a product to market again and they failed again. Third party game developers were reluctant to make games for the system Sega wasn't even able to launch a game with its most popular character, Sonic, on the console. The Saturn failed to catch on with the gaming public and was discontinued by 1998.

Nintendo's answer to the PlayStation and the Saturn was to step back, take a breath, skip the whole 32-bit thing, and get a head start on the next generation of consoles. The Nintendo 64 was launched in 1996 and was an immediate hit. As you might have guessed from the name, the console came loaded with a 64-bit processor. The system was also widely praised for its controller design, which included a control stick.

Now, although it was technically digital, and not an analog stick, it had varying degrees of movement and nearly three hundred and sixty degree control. You still had the D-pad, like most game controllers, but you were limited to those eight directions whereas with the control stick, you allowed for much more nuanced

movement which was ideal for 3D-rendered worlds that were everywhere in the 90s.

And the N64 capitalized on these great controllers by also being the first mass-market console with four built-in controller ports. This not only differentiated the console from other options -- it foreshadowed a focus on multiplayer social games that would be some of its best sellers. The N64 was also the last major console to deliver games on cartridges. While cartridges allowed for blazing fast data transfers, and avoided those load screens no-one likes, they did introduce limitations for developers. Those storage capacities we talked about before became an increasing concern for these larger and larger games. Also, cartridges were much more expensive to manufacture, meaning a game that didn't sell well was a much bigger loss for a company if that game was on a cartridge versus a CD-ROM.

But these consoles weren't successful just because they had the latest technology. Sega Saturn and Atari Jaguar had that as well. Advanced hardware can only do so much to help sell a console, but great games can do the trick. The PlayStation and the Nintendo 64 dominated the market in the late 1990s because they used these technological advances to deliver great gaming experiences.

Nintendo understood how to harness the potential of 3D immediately. Super Mario 64 featured a huge world that was entirely polygon-based. The game featured a flying camera system that followed the player around the world but also allowed players to take control and explore scenes by swiveling the camera around.

Another huge Nintendo 64 hit was Goldeneye 007, a first-person shooter based in the James Bond universe. Unlike the movie it was based on, the game was met with pretty universal acclaim from critics and from players. It would go on to sell eight million copies. Goldeneye 007 was praised for well-crafted single-player missions as well as its local multiplayer death-match mode. The game leveraged the N64's four-controller port to host four-player combat and, as it turned out, players really like shooting each other in video games.

The four N64 controller ports allowed Nintendo to focus on making video games that you could play in groups such as four-player races in Mario Kart 64 and Diddy Kong Racing and four-player minigames in the Mario Party series or four-player fights in Super Smash Brothers. But even all this couldn't keep up with the PlayStation's success. Sony's close relationship with developers led to many excellent and innovative games appearing on its system. Games like Tomb Raider.

Tomb Raider was released on PlayStation in 1996 and became one of the most iconic games of the era. The game was met with praise for its huge, richly detailed world and its innovative level design that pushed the boundaries of a digital platforming game. The game's lead character, Lara Croft, was an instant celebrity and Tomb Raider even had success outside of video games. The franchise spread out into movies and Lara appeared on the covers of magazines that were normally about real people. She even made an appearance on YouTube's Pop Mark Tour.

But Tomb Raider was also met with a lot of criticism. Much of it centered around Lara Croft's unrealistic body proportions and the sexualization of her character, although some of the concerns about Lara and unrealistic body images happen to dress in later versions of the game. All of this points to the unprecedented level of immersion and connection that 1990s games introduced to the market. These more-realistic-than-ever characters and following them in their game worlds as well as in real life allowed players to connect with them like never before.

In addition to characters, the advances in the industry also increased the ways players connected with games through improved storytelling. And there is no better example of the massive narratives that could unfold on the new consoles than Final Fantasy VII. This roleplay game was so huge, it was delivered on three disks. So the world of Final Fantasy VII was open-ended and players could choose their path.

While the game has a linear story, there are also many optional side quests for players to take. The Manchuria system allowed players to adjust and alter their abilities and the massive storage capacity of CDs meant developers could include lots of full-motion video cutscenes and include a lot of story to go with all that gameplay. And there was a lot of gameplay. Players could literally spend hundreds of hours in the game, trying to complete the many quests and collect all the items and spells.

Final Fantasy VII was also successfully ported to personal computers and oh man, we haven't even talked about PC gaming yet! Home computers were also becoming more powerful and the games that were available for them were improving as well. There were ports of console games like Tomb Raider and Final Fantasy VII, but there were several games and genres that were at their best in their PC version.

First-person shooters flourished in the PC space. Games like Quake and Duke Nukem capitalized on the success of Doom and delivered more and more harrowing experiences to PC players. But even the FPS scene was able to add compelling storytelling. There were franchises like Half-Life that were successful in integrating gripping stories into FPS action. And as we got to the end of the 1990s, Sega tried one more entry into the console market.

On 9/9/1999 (September 9th 1999), Sega released the Dreamcast, which was powerful, innovative, and launched with great games. In addition to raw processing power, the Dreamcast featured a modem for online multiplayer games. "Play on this new thing called the internet!" And it also had a cool controller that had an optional display. And it had lots of really good games, and lots of really weird games. Like Seaman.

But even with its Sonic Adventures, its Jet Set Radios, its Marvel vs Capcoms, the Dreamcast didn't take off and ended up being Sega's final home console. The company changed its business model to become a game development company only and Nintendo and Sony were the only two consoles left standing.

But the market wouldn't stay uncrowded for long. Next time, we're going to discuss the arrival of a new home console from a company that rivals even the megacorp that is Sony. A company that pushed the technological and storytelling aspects of the medium even further. That's right. We're talking about a little company called Microsoft. We'll see you next time.

Stan Muller: Crash Course Games is filmed in the Chad and Stacey Emigholz Studio in Indianapolis, Indiana and its made with the help of all these nice people. If you'd like to keep Crash Course free for everyone forever you can support the series at Patreon, a crowdfunding platform that allows you to support the content you love.

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