<i>Super Power, Spoony Bards, and Silverware</i>

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REVIEW OF SUPER POWER, SPOONY BARDS, AND SILVERWARE

Super Power, Spoony Bards, and Silverware
by Dominic Arsenault
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Nintendo's presence in the videogames medium is substantial, so much so that the company's name became a byword for the medium. Over the past few decades that Nintendo has been directly involved in the videogames medium, its dominance has fluctuated considerably. In *Super Power, Spoony Bards, and Silverware*, despite its initially perplexing title, Dominic Arsenault addresses – for the most part – the role of the Super Nintendo Entertainment System (SNES [Super Famicom in its native Japan]) and what it meant for Nintendo. Arsenault contextualises his approach under the aptly and purposefully titled Nintendo Economic System; NES for short. This might seem as too endearing towards its subject matter, but the book is an objective look at what is explained to be the decline of Nintendo as a home console manufacturer during the 1990s, despite subjective sentiments claiming the SNES era to be a golden age for Nintendo.

Super Power, Spoony Bards, and Silverware is part of the wider "Platform Studies" series of books, one that focuses on individual platforms, but thankfully Arsenault does not focus on the SNES in isolation and ignore other consoles, be it Nintendo or other platform manufactures. It might come across as extraneous to dedicate a chapter to Nintendo's previous console, the Nintendo Entertainment System (NES [Famicom in Japan]), especially as there is a whole book dedicated to the NES in the Platform Studies series. But this is essential as it is here where Arsenault's concept of the Nintendo Economic System is formally introduced. This is an insightful perspective into the ideology of the veteran company; if there is one point that can be seen as the central tenant of the rationale behind many of its actions, it is that of "never relinquish control". Nintendo has made some questionable decisions over the decades, even if it harms the company in some form, but this is deemed an acceptable cost to maintain overall control; and the SNES era was no different in this regard. This was evident in the relationship between Nintendo and the third-party developers that wanted to bring videogames to Nintendo's consoles. As much as possible was done on Nintendo's terms, with the very presence of third-party companies almost seen as an annoyance, trying to benefit from Nintendo's garden of Eden.

Nintendo is described by Arsenault as a "self-party" firm because it is invested in both sides of the videogames market; hardware and software. Typically, first party-firms rely on third-party firms to contribute the software that is available for their hardware, and because the third-party firms do not create their own hardware, neither type of firm are deemed to be in competition. Nintendo is different in this aspect as they are often the largest provider of software for their own systems (in terms of units sold), thereby putting them in direct competition with third-party firms. During the time of the NES, however, there was little serious competition in the hardware space, and due to the high demand for videogames software generated by the success of the NES, Nintendo was able to dictate terms that companies had to comply with to get their games onto the system. Nintendo viewed the strict requirements it placed on third-parties as a fair price, given that they [Nintendo] did all the hard work, resulting in Arsenault's use of analogy the "walled garden" to describe the state of the Nintendo Economic System surrounding the NES. A walled garden is most effective when there is little alternative, but as efforts from Sega and NEC improved, third-party firms were less inclined to put up with Nintendo's strict requirements. This became even more problematic when Nintendo moved to the North American market, where the newly formed Nintendo of America (NoA) had to negotiate less aggressive terms with American firms, although of course Nintendo still retained that all-important control.

This desire for maintaining control could be seen in part as a response to the position that Nintendo finds itself in relating to how it obtains and manufactures the videogame consoles that it sells. Unlike later competitors such as Sony, Nintendo does not possess the facilities to develop its own components; each console is made from "off the shelf" parts. Arsenault explains how Nintendo is therefore reliant on the capabilities of other companies for the technical basis of its consoles, meaning the company needs to create the strongest bargaining hand it can manage. It is for this reason that Nintendo continues to use "out-dated" technology, as this can be purchased in bulk utilising economies of scale to gain favourable costs. But Nintendo is only able to continue to do this because it can afford to place such large orders. Nintendo's approach to selling consoles also differs from its direct competitors as the company makes it a priority to sell its consoles at a profit, rather than selling at a loss to give it a more attractive price, and then hoping to make more money back via sales made through software licensing. This is made clear by Arsenault as he states in the latter part of the book the percentage of software sold for Nintendo consoles is dominated by Nintendo published games. Highlighting why Nintendo cannot afford to rely on the success of third-party software to provide it with the cash reserves necessary to invest into the next console.

The original Famicom/NES was not marketed as a technical powerhouse, instead, as a family computer in Japan and an entertainment system in the West (so much so that NoA redesigned the console so that it looked and operated more like a home video cassette player). Whilst home console sequels existed beforehand, Nintendo was for the first time preparing a direct follow up with the Super Famicom/SNES; therefore, it was crucial to highlight the benefits that this new system would provide, downplaying the fact that if consumers wanted to play the newest games they *had* to buy the newer system. This technological obsolescence can feel forced upon those who have invested money and time into the previous NES console, which is why Nintendo carefully marketed the SNES as a significant upgrade, going so far as using the tagline "now you're playing with power", and the use of the prefix *super* to denote its superiority over the previous console. This, however, as pointed out by Arsenault, is an exaggeration. Whilst the SNES was indeed more powerful than its predecessor, it was no technical “powerhouse”. Again, using a similar approach of utilising “out-dated” technology and optimising it to make it as efficient as possible – referred to as Yokoi Principle, named after in-house designer Gunpei Yokoi who favoured the use of lateral thinking rather than focusing on high tech components for the sake of it – the SNES was a cost-effective way to keep Nintendo relevant in the home console market. Despite on the surface appearing to abandon the Yokoi Principle, it was alive and well behind the scenes, the difference being Nintendo was actively persuading the public of the advancements now possible thanks to its new console. This could be an elaborate act of smoke and mirrors, providing players with spectacle whilst simultaneously masking the limitations of the console. This was evident with the promotion of a specific graphical process named Mode 7, which was described as providing players with 3D style graphics, despite technically displaying 2D images, but layering them in a way that appeared to be 3D. This was enough to allow Nintendo to appear to be keeping up with its competitors. Later upgrades to the technical prowess of the SNES emerged in the years that followed via the use of components such as the Super FX chip; this was embedded in the videogame cartridges themselves to make up for the insufficient capabilities of the base SNES hardware. This enabled the SNES to display 3D images, albeit very basic ones, most notable with *Star Fox*.

The "super" in Super FX chip crucially continued the use of what Arsenault describes as having "practically become a Nintendo trademark", as well as assisting Nintendo to skip a crucial piece of technology that was now being used by its competitors - namely the use of CD-ROM technology - yet still enabling it to compete on its own terms. With Nintendo continuing to bring technical advancements through the SNES game cartridges, the base SNES console remained the same; therefore, production of the system would only get cheaper, which as pointed out earlier in the book, Nintendo's aim was to generate as much profit as it could from its consoles. In addition, if other developers wanted to utilise this technology for their games, the risk would be with them and not Nintendo, as they had to purchase the cartridges from Nintendo up front and then distribute them. If the game failed to sell through the stock that was available, the loss remained with the developer.

Nintendo’s hesitant approach when it came to adopting new technological elements could be argued to have contributed to the fall of its walled garden. With CD-ROM technology adopted by Nintendo’s main competitors by the mid-1990s, an attractive alternative was now available to third-party developers. Arsenault explains that the use of CD-ROMs rectified many problems that afflicted videogames because of the cartridge-based storage medium. Developers now had access to around 650MB of storage, considerably more than the mere 16MB cartridges used by the Nintendo 64. With Sony’s new PlayStation – itself the realisation of a failed CD-based add-on for the SNES between Sony and Nintendo – using this storage medium as standard developers were able to include higher quality sound as well as Full Motion Video (FMV) that was not possible with cartridges. Another crucial aspect outlined by Arsenault was that developers were no longer at the mercy of the time it took Nintendo to produce the cartridges in Japan, which could take up to three months and had to be paid for upfront before production could begin. Plus, Nintendo ultimately decided how many cartridges a developer could order. The nature of CD-ROMs meant that an order could be completed in less than two weeks, meaning more copies could be quickly produced if required. Furthermore, blank CDs were considerably less expensive at about $6 compared to $35 for blank cartridges. The combination of financial benefits, extra storage, and the creative freedom this brought made the use of CD-ROMs desirable for many developers.

Ultimately, Sony was successful at taking market share away from Nintendo because it was able to attract third-party developers away from Nintendo's walled garden by offering greener open fields.

The premise of *Super Power, Spoony Bards, and Silverware* is one of re-evaluating the influence of the SNES and its impact on the videogames medium and industry. Whilst it outsold its main competitor, Sega, the SNES failed to recapture the wider-reaching success of its predecessor. But the crux of Arsenault's argument is that the approach Nintendo took during the lifespan of the SNES handicapped the company moving forward. Its following two home consoles languished behind as it moved further from the Yokoi Principle. Even when trying to adapt to common standards, such as finally adopting a disc-based storage medium, Nintendo still did so in a way that retained additional control, as evident with the GameCube's use of miniDVDs instead of standard DVDs.

Whilst Arsenault does not go into too much detail regarding Nintendo's position since its highly successful Wii console, the insight into the Nintendo Economic System continues to be relevant, with the Yokoi Principle resurgent, as evident in the design of Nintendo's current hybrid system, the Nintendo Switch. Nintendo's so-called "Golden Age" during the SNES era is rightfully scrutinised by Arsenault as a fabrication, but he has rationally outlined how Nintendo's continued desire to "never relinquish control" is partly responsible for the difficulties it faced during the 1990s. This case study insightfully explores how Nintendo utilised its position in the videogames industry to its advantage, only for it to be undone by its desire for control. Not quite a warning for other console manufacturers, but rather, a fascinating insight into how the videogames industry has been shaped.