

First, Siyahhan and Gee give parents a list of potential questions to ask their children who play and suggests ways for families to engage in game modding and making, including naming specific useful tools (such as Twine) and offering advice on how to approach them. Second, the authors provide guidelines for developers to encourage intergenerational play through their video game design. Developers would do well to think about incorporating moments of relevance for different ages and skill levels, designing challenges that can be shared, and how play can be divided among players to meet these joint challenges.

Overall, *Families at Play* is a welcome addition to the sociocultural story of learning with games because it provides much needed nuance to the discussion by expanding what we know to include specific details how families engage in productive play.

—Mark Chen, *University of Washington Bothell, Bothell, WA*

Super Power, Spooky Bards, and Silverware: The Super Nintendo Entertainment System

Dominic Arsenault

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Dominic Arsenault's book, *Super Power, Spooky Bards, and Silverware: The Super Nintendo Entertainment System*, offers a valuable reminder of what all scholarly

activity should have at its core—the willingness to challenge firmly held beliefs. After all, a belief that does not stand up to rigorous scrutiny is not a belief worth having. Arsenault's work allows us the chance to do exactly that, rigorously to scrutinize the widely held belief that the Super Nintendo Entertainment System (SNES) video game console was a stellar piece of hardware that enabled some of the greatest software in video game history. Arsenault uses extensive research and novel information to reframe most major factors that contribute to that belief. Ultimately, his book is not designed to change the reader's mind regarding these widely agreed-upon beliefs of the Super Nintendo. However, it demands the reader flex some mental muscles that may have grown weak after decades of simply adopting the same old assumptions about the platform.

Not everything in the book runs contrary to popular opinion. Peppered throughout Arsenault's argument are bits of what would pass as common knowledge among video game historians. He describes how the advent of CD-ROMs and polygonal graphics made the original Sony PlayStation console an enticing platform for third-party developers. And the fact that Nintendo constantly relies on current or last generation technology for its hardware forms a key tenet.

In its quest to provide new information, the book offers some truly novel facts and observations. Many people are aware of Nintendo and Sony's inability to work together in creating a CD-ROM addition to the SNES. Nintendo abruptly, and publicly, severed the deal with Sony in favor of one with Philips. But the author adds to the discussion that this extremely abrupt

shift may have been the result of legal pressure from Philips about what it believed was patent infringement.

The book really shines in the middle chapters where the author describes, in detail, how the SNES's hardware informed the design of its games. In the hands of another writer, these portions of the book could have been either painfully dry, incomprehensible, or both. For instance, the author sheds light on the mysteries of the undesired flickering effect that many gamers endured during the 8- and 16-bit era. In short, it was the result of sprite count limitations being split among multiple frames shouldering the load. On the software side, *Jim Power: The Lost Dimension in 3-D* is covered in a particularly impressive way. The succinct and accurate description of the game's visuals "sickening" result is spot on.

Unfortunately, the weakest parts of the book stem from a lack of clarity in assessment.

For instance, the author criticizes Nintendo for iterating its hardware from generation to generation while also praising Sony for what appears to be the same behavior. There is likely a clear difference in the author's mind, but it does not come through in the text.

The book also glosses over several other facts. For instance, the author wants Nintendo to have had a far less strict relationship with third-party developers and to have been more accessible to independent game developers. He lists valuable

benefits for doing this. But, he ignores the fact that a lack of gate keeping in the software marketplace is largely what caused Western markets to lose faith in video games less than a decade earlier.

Many points are also made with the benefit of hindsight. For instance, it is obvious now that Nintendo could have prospered, at least in the short term, from a partnership with Sony and its expertise. However, other technology companies in that era tried to break into the video game market and failed, even with CD-ROMs (Apple Pippin, Philips CD-i). In addition, the author is correct in that Nintendo's approach to video game design during the SNES era relied on genres that may appear relatively stale now, but that audiences in the early 1990s still clamored for.

Despite these shortcomings, this book is worthy of a place alongside some of the more commonly used texts on the subject. These include Blake Harris' *Console Wars: Sega, Nintendo, and the Battle That Defined a Generation* and David Sheff's *Game Over: Nintendo's Battle to Dominate Videogames*. I recommend reading these books first and treating *Super Power, Spooky Bards, and Silverware* as a companion to help round out your perspective. In the end, the author's view is far from singleminded as he concludes "there's no arguing with the SNES's lasting appeal and ongoing esteem."

—Joseph A. Loporcaro, *University of Rochester, Rochester, NY*