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ENG 1131

September 15, 2005

Playing with Paper:

A Review of Nintendo's Latest Plumber Product, *Paper Mario: The Thousand Year Door*

It's been three years since the last iteration of Paper Mario, and like a fine wine, this series only gets better with age. During his RPG absence, our favorite plumber has basked in sunshine, swung golf clubs, and witnessed the ghost hunting skills of his own green twin. He has taken backseat in his own racing game and hosted numerous frantic parties along the way. Surely, Nintendo could find plenty of new homes for their mustached mascot. Thankfully though, Nintendo's own Intelligent Systems returns Mario to his paper form as they seek to shave any frayed edges off an almost perfect predecessor.

Similar to recent Nintendo franchises such as *Pikmin* and *Mario Kart*, the new *Paper Mario* is not overly innovative or groundbreaking. It does not parallel the jump from *Super Mario RPG* to the original *Paper Mario*, nor does it reflect the past and present appearances of heroine Samus Aran. Although Intelligent Systems chose not to reinvent the franchise, they do build upon it with an array of minor improvements that culminate into Mario nirvana: a true gaming experience capable of engrossing gamers of all ages. While children marvel at the classic Nintendo design, fun and colorful worlds, and overly happy characters, past veterans will revel in humorous nostalgia, greeting memorable characters and laughing at the game's endless humor.

The game begins in a town called Rogueport, a melting pot and hub connecting all of the wildly different locales throughout Mario's world. The town has its east and its west sides, thus offering an array of differing characters from snobbish royalty to scandalous thieves. Here,

Princess Peach encounters a mysterious cloaked figure selling a magical map detailing the locations of seven Star Crystals. After her purchase, our beloved Peach becomes an unfortunate prisoner (What else is new?) and Mario must use the magic map to complete his treasure hunt, locate the seven crystals, and unveil the hidden secrets of the Thousand Year Door.

Throughout this journey, Mario will encounter a long list of characters both friend and foe. By the game's end, a team of seven allies will accompany our hero, from the goomba archeologist Goombella to a rambunctious baby Yoshi. As in the original, each ally comes equipped with his or her own array of moves that not only assist in battle, but help to navigate through levels and unlock hidden secrets as well. Goombella, for example, reveals information about enemies and areas while Yoshi helps Mario to gobble enemies and cross large gaps. In addition to these, Mario has his own list of special abilities as well. He may be made of paper, but after obtaining specific abilities, Mario will be more powerful than ever: rolling up to tumble through tunnels, slipping through cracks and other skinny places, and traveling through air and sea as both a paper airplane and boat.

In battle, Mario can use an array of moves depending on his level and the badges he has equipped. Badges are an integral part of customizing both Mario and his friends, giving them new moves, improved health and defense, and other more strange and less serious changes. In total, the game offers a wealth of customization and includes more than 80 badges to collect. Other options include combining items to form special recipes as well as obtaining the curse of a wizard for in-battle enhancements. All of these help incorporate the player into battle, applying strategy and urging a know-how of item use and their proper situations. These all help make battles fun and increase a sense of accomplishment, though victory always feels better with the roar of a supporting audience.

This audience is the true defining factor between the battles of the original *Paper Mario* and its sequel. Each battle is presented on a stage. Mario and friends enter from the left while enemies enter from the right. Moves are played out like mini-games, using button-timed presses to increase damage and fan applause. By performing well, one will garner the support of the audience to fill a star meter that can be used to perform special attacks. These attacks are vital to one's success, helping to finish off a difficult foe or heal one's health to prolong a fight.

Unfortunately, not all "performances" will play out flawlessly as enemies will often enter the audience. Armed with soda cans, rocks, and other items, audience members will hurl objects onto the stage to help bring down our plumber. To close up the description of battle (a topic that could extend for much longer given the depth of Nintendo's flawless system) one should make note of the inclusion of "stylish moves". With specific button pressing, one can dazzle up a performance to increase audience support and further fill his star meter. For example, by following a hammer attack with a series of "A" presses, Mario will perform a daring triple back flip as the crowd roars. Again, the game encourages the player to maintain full interaction at all times.

Such deep action helps to create a simplistic yet engrossing battle experience, one that is actually fun to play. Fun? Yes, fun. Unlike other RPGs where the player often tires of the same battle sequences and mindless menu choosing, Mario's system encourages strategy and constant interaction between player and avatar. Battling, though, comes second to the game's overall defining aspect: the story. As in almost all Mario outings, Princess Peach is captured once again and Mario must venture out to rescue her. Beyond this though, developer Intelligent Systems worked tirelessly to create a communication system that solidifies the role-playing experience. Traveling as Mario and friends, players will encounter numerous characters, each with a library of things to say. A number of variables depict what a specific character may say, such as game completion or what avatar leads the conversation. Mario also obtains a special Gameboy SP that

links him to past run-ins via a mail system. This keeps the player connected through the entire Paper Mario world during the thirty-plus hours of gameplay, despite where the player may be. This helps to connect the player to the world, giving him a list of what seem to be unending relationships.

It should be noted that despite the Gamecube's power over the Nintendo 64, Intelligent Systems hasn't made huge bounds to overpower the prequel visually. Textures are smoother and lines are crisper, though the visual effects of the paper remain along the simple lines of turning pages and crumpling balls. Sounds are classic Nintendo fare: humorous and gleeful. New scores enter the fray along with classic reinterpretations of Nintendo's most memorable. Overall, *Paper Mario: The Thousand Year Door* cannot be passed over. This game is a memorable experience of strong friendships and climactic battles (the boss ones that is) and the wealth of replay value is incredible. A multitude of sidequests extend playtime beyond the final boss battle and one can spend numerous hours collecting badges, uncovering crystal shards and shine sprites, and competing in what may be one of my most difficult outings ever in gaming: The Pit of 100 Trials.