Super Meat Boy:
A Love Letter

Matthew Thomas Payne, University of Alabama,
mtpayne@ua.edu
Stephen Campbell, University of Alabama,
sccampbell4@crimson.ua.edu

Super Meat Boy

Meat Boy is a sprinting, leaping, sliding cube of bloody red meat. Meat Boy is also a love letter, albeit an unconventional one. The independently produced multiplatform game that bears his name, *Super Meat Boy* (2010) – sequel to the 2008 online and free-to-play *Meat Boy* – is a love letter to the 8-bit platformers of the 1980s and 1990s. *Super Meat Boy* is also a love letter to players who poured countless hours into those often grueling and unforgiving side-scrolling adventures. The game was a breakout hit for its creators Edmund McMillen and Tommy Refenes (Team Meat), with *Super Meat Boy (SMB)* earning a number of "Game of the Year" awards and going "platinum" (selling over a million copies) in only a few short months (Yin-Poole, 2012, n.p.).

SMB's success is no accident; indeed, the reason for the game's critical and popular reception is (at least) two-fold. First, it lures gamers to it with its incisive, self-conscious aesthetic and intertextual references. *SMB*'s tongue-in-cheek characters and its thoroughgoing black humor satirize the common platforming mechanics and narrative conventions from yesteryear. The game clearly knows and appreciates where it came from. But this by itself would amount to little more than window-dressing were there nothing more to hang these cosmetic design choices on. After all, video gamers are not for want of retro-chic titles that openly trade in gaming nostalgia.

The second, and far more significant reason for *SMB*'s success, is that it improves markedly on the core gameplay design that characterized its forbearers. 8-bit platformers are notoriously arduous, onerous, and capricious puzzles. Moreover, they are often unfair. They are labeled as such because they punitively punish players for the games' own design failures, including (among other problems) wildly uneven levels of difficulty and broken programming (i.e., the game is "buggy" or "glitchy"). SMB is not a simple re-imagining of previous titles. Rather, it is in effect what a great many of those previous platformers should have been. These interrelated points – the retro art style and its tight, gameplay design – will be assessed in turn to demonstrate why SMB has been lauded by gamers and critics despite its considerable difficulty.

Super *Treat* Boy

Super Meat Boy's inspiration begins with the title itself, or rather, with its abbreviation. It is not surprising that McMillen and Refenes would choose to model their game after what is arguably the best-known platformer of all time: *Super Mario Bros.* (1985). Shigeru Miyamoto's Nintendo classic is more than abstract inspiration for Team Meat. Indeed, they considered *Super Mario Bros.* to be an unofficial design template. According to Edmund McMillen: "When Tommy and I talked about attempting to remake the Mario formula, we didn't really discuss it publicly. Nothing could ever touch Mario, and nothing has ever come close, but as a designer I desperately wanted to at least try. *Super Meat Boy* is *Super Mario Bros.* if Tommy and I made it. If we had made a design doc, it would have been as simple as that" (*Super Meat Boy,* 2011, n.p.). Not surprisingly, allusions to *Super Mario Bros.* abound in *Super Meat Boy*: from the narrative catalyst of the kidnapped love interest (Princess Peach's kidnapping by Bowser in *Mario Bros.* and Bandage Girl's abduction by Dr. Fetus in *Meat Boy*), to the existence of "warp zones," and the levels' numbering nomenclature (e.g., World 1-1).

Super Mario Bros. is not the game's only point of 8-bit inspiration, however. The cut scene animations introducing each new Super Meat Boy world are themselves references to the opening scenes of other classic games including *Ghost 'n Goblins* (1985), *Street Fighter II* (1987), *Mega Man 2* (1988), *Ninja Gaiden* (1989), and *Castlevania* (1986), among others, with the *SMB* characters – Meat Boy, Bandage Girl, and Dr. Fetus – starring in these re-imagined sequences. The allusions to classic gaming culture extend beyond each world's introductory cut-scenes to the game's hidden levels and player-characters. These un-lockable levels are modeled after classic games and gaming platforms (such as Nintendo's original, black and white hand-held Gameboy device). But *SMB*'s playful, tongue-in-cheek humor is arguably no more evident than with its elusive "Glitch Zone" levels. In these hard-to-reach levels, the screen is made to look like a broken Nintendo game with missing textiles and jumbled text. (Unlike the original NES cartridges, however, you cannot blow into *SMB* to fix the glichy graphics!). Additionally, in a handful of the game's un-lockable "Warp Zone" levels, the gamer plays as characters borrowed from contemporary independent games who sport jumping abilities different from Meat Boy. These colorful characters hail from similarly challenging indie platformers such as Bit. *Trip Runner* (2010), *Mighty Jill Off* (2008) *Jumper* (2004), *Flywrench* (2007), and *I Wanna Be The Guy* (2007). Team Meat's inclusion of these characters gestures that they are as appreciative of retro games' influence on their creative process as they are of the indie game development community of which they are a part.

Figure 1: Dr. Fetus strikes Bandage Girl in front of Meat Boy.

SMB's visual design draws playfully upon a hodgepodge of intertextual gaming references. Level after level, gamers are offered visual treats that position them – Team Meat – and us – the gamers – as being hip to insider jokes meaningful to veteran gamers. But theses allusions are not the only reason for SMB's nostalgic appeal. In an essay appearing in an anthology on classic gaming, Sean Fenty argues that the lasting appeal of retro gaming is tied to the core, performative nature of games, and that nostalgia is perhaps more pronounced in games than in other media because they require actions which connect the game and the gamer. He notes: "Once we learn the rhythms, we are home – player and game, dancer and dance, one and the same." (Fenty, 2008, p. 22). Later, he continues:

New games continue to evolve increasingly complex and sophisticated graphic, incorporate increasingly complex storylines, and in general offer an interactive space for cinema-like representation. As such, they can evoke nostalgia for earlier days in much the same way as cinema, but with the added allure of interactivity. Video games can represent the past as it was, or as it never was, but they can also represent how

players wish to remember it, revisiting or revising the past to make players yearn for it, and they can offer players the possibility of not only being there but of doing things there – of playing the past. (emphasis in original, p. 27)

Experiencing nostalgia in SMB is irrevocably tied to playing SMB. And playing Super Meat Boy means dying in Super Meat Boy – a lot. How, then, does a game which kills players quickly and frequently nevertheless engender strong feelings of progress and accomplishment?

Super *Defeat* Boy

In addition to its playful 8-bit art style and bevy of insider jokes, SMB's negotiation of gameplay difficulty, punishment, and reward hails hardcore and ex-hardcore players alike. The game's level design and the player's progression through its eight worlds and over 300 levels accomplish this feat in several ways (1). First, with the exception of its "boss battles," most SMB levels are short and can be bested in little time; sometimes in a few seconds (if played properly, of course). (Indeed, completing a SMB level with an "A+" rating amounts to a de facto "speedrun"). SMB also saves the player's progress, inviting gamers to play the game in brief sessions and to revisit previous levels to attain better times. Games scholar Jesper Juul observes that this issue of time investment is one of the key differences between casual and hardcore game design. Juul (2010) notes:

A common complaint is that life with children, jobs, and general adult responsibilities is not conducive to playing video games for long periods of time. The player that at one time was a stereotypical hardcore player may find him or herself in a new life situation: still wanting to play video games, but only able to play short sessions at a time. Many players of casual games are such ex-hardcore players … they probably still have the same taste in fiction, but are unable to invest large amounts of time in playing games. (p.51)

Like the ability to save, most of *SMB*'s levels possess a tiered reward structure that encourages repetitive play in the form of hard-to-reach or un-lockable items. Somewhat paradoxically, this design choice makes *SMB* more accessible because it allows for different degrees of participation (i.e., making the game more "casual"), and deeper because it rewards the player for investing the time needed to overcome difficult challenges (i.e., making it more "hardcore"). For the casual player, *SMB*'s simple and short level designs are easy to understand and give quick, effective feedback. And because the beginning levels are mostly brief, players can play through them over a short period time. The hardcore player, meanwhile, can approach these same levels with an eye toward unlocking the game's secret characters, discovering the elusive warp zones, and earning "A+" level completion times. The game serves as a brief distraction for those looking to play only for a few minutes, or as a treasure trove of challenging rewards for those wanting to showcase their bona fides as skilled and dedicated gamers.

One of the more inspired and gratifying design choices accompanies the successful completion of each level. Once Meat Boy reaches Bandage Girl, triggering the end of the round (whereupon she is re-kidnapped by the evil Dr. Fetus every time), the gamer is treated to a replay of all their previous attempts at the level. This cumulative replay brilliantly unfolds along a single timeline, transforming the screen into a veritable fireworks display of leaping and splattering Meat Boys. Beyond its visual power as spectacle – which, for the record, should not be underestimated – these replays (again, featured round, after round, after round) remind the player that their hard work and perseverance have not gone unrewarded. Gamers also come to realize while watching these comically horrifying replays that SMB's levels are tightly scripted affairs; that they are challenging but not impossible puzzles (though they might seem so after the first dozen tries). The advanced levels are so meticulously engineered and demand such precise input, that SMB feels more like a rhythm-puzzle game than it does an action-platformer.

Figure 2: A torrent of meat boys on parade in a post-level replay.

And this is where SMB parts ways with so many other classic and classically inspired platformers. The game is difficult – painfully so at times – but it is not unpredictable. SMB's levels are complex, but they are not malicious. And SMB is demanding, but it permits gamers of different skill levels and time commitments to traverse its deadly platforms in ways that complement their play styles and lifestyles. Team Meat's Edmund McMillen lamented the state of difficulty in today's games, and commented on their way of addressing this problem, stating:

Difficulty has kind of been thrown out the door and replaced with accessibility over all else, erasing any real challenge. It was vital for us to bring back the difficulty of the retro age, but also reinvent the idea of what difficulty meant. Frustration was the biggest part of retro difficulty and something we felt needed to be removed at all costs in order to give the player a sense of accomplishment without discouraging them to the point of quitting. At its core, this idea was quite basic: Remove lives, reduce respawn time, keep the levels short and keep the goal always in sight. On top of these refinements, we added constant positive feedback, and even death became something to enjoy when

you knew that upon completing the level you would be rewarded with an epic showing of all your past deaths. The replay feature was a way to remind the player that they were getting better through their own actions and reinforce that feeling of accomplishment of doing something difficult and succeeding. (Super Meat Boy, 2012, n.p.)

But the real issue, as Juul correctly notes, is less about difficulty per se than it is about "how the player is punished for failing" (2010, p. 42). In an essay on difficulty in games, Juul (2009) strikes this distinction between failure and punishment: "Failure means being unsuccessful in some task or interdiction that the game has set up, and punishment is what happens to the player as a result" (p. 237). Juul posts these four categories of punishment:

(1) Energy punishment: Loss of energy, bringing the player closer to life punishment; (2) Life punishment: Loss of a life (or "retry"), bringing the player closer to game termination; (3) Game termination punishment: Game over; (4) Setback punishment: Having to start a level over and losing abilities. (p. 238)

SMB's lauded difficulty is mitigated by its uniquely balanced punishment system. Meat Boy is a valiant but fragile hero who is killed with a single hit or misstep. Or, using Juul's labels, the game's "energy punishment" is absolute and severe. However, when the player dies, she is instantly respawned at the beginning of that specific level without having to sit through any protracted death animations or suffer the inconvenience of restarting at the beginning of that world. There is also no cap on player lives (i.e., "game termination punishment"), and no stripping the player of abilities or forward progress (i.e., "setback punishment"). This means that with the exception of the "Warp Zone" bonus levels (where there is a strict allowance of three lives), players only return to the main menu when they decide to give up on a level.

SMB's difficulty-punishment design balance and its levels' tiered challenges (from one level to the next, as well as the reward structure within single levels) conveys to gamers that they are responsible for their accomplishments and failings. The failure to save Bandage Girl rests with the player, not with Team Meat. As Juul observes, "failure adds content by making the player see new nuances in the game" (2010, p. 237). In other words, failure in *SMB* generative; it is productive. The game's early stages show players how to sprint, allowing for faster speed at a cost of control, and introduce common platforming moves like the wall jump. Additional elements such as moving obstacles and dissolving floors teach players to think, act, and react quickly. As play continues, the challenges increase in difficulty as players struggle to anticipate where the next safe platform might appear. Misjudging the timing of a leap by a fraction of a second means the difference between threading the needle between two deadly traps, or jumping into a celling (or floor) of deadly needles. Of course, all of Meat Boy's moves must be combined to traverse his universe's innumerable hurdles, like deadly piles of salt, walls of saw blades, and other Meat Boy-killing nastiness. And while failure in *Super Meat Boy* is not an asset like sprinting or wall jumping, it is nevertheless an essential feature for deducing the level's logic. After multiple deaths a pattern and rhythm emerge as the stage becomes progressively easier because the player sees the level in its complexity. Punishment is, thus, meted out (no pun intended) in such a way that repeated failures do not inhibit success; rather, the opposite is true. Failures are necessary for success.

Super *Elite* Boy

Even one of the better-known web advertisements for *Super Meat Boy* is itself crafted in a retro style; specifically, that of a 1990s TV spot reminiscent of the commercials made for the NES and Super NES game systems (see, Super Meat Boy's 90s Commercial). This tongue-in-cheek advert reinforces the major themes of SMB – that this plat

former's playfully parodic content is a loving homage to our collective gaming past. Again, Team Meat's Edmund McMillen on the game's production:

Tommy (Refenes) and I bonded over the course of development, and *Super Meat Boy* was an expression of that. We had fun making this game and didn't hold those feelings back when it came to the decisions we made. *Super Meat Boy* was a schoolyard inside joke that just got out of hand. I think one of the things that is most appealing about *SMB* is anyone who plays video games gets to be in on that joke. (Super Meat Boy, 2011, n.p.)

But to understand *SMB* as some glorified joke – as a ludic punch line – is to miss one of the game's more substantial accomplishments. (Please understand that this is not to say that the game is not funny – because *SMB is funny.* Indeed, it is fantastically funny at times). The more noteworthy feat is that after enduring countless levels covered with gratuitous streaks of blood and epic replays of cascading and exploding lemming-like Meat Boys, that the game remains endearing and sentimental. Sean Fenty (2008) reminds us of the power of games to transport us through time, saying: "Video games may be, for some, artifacts of a past they want to return to, but video games also offer the seduction of a perfect past that can be replayed, a past within which players can participate, and a past in which players can move and explore" (p. 22). *SMB* presents older gamers with the complex and smart NES-style platformer that they craved as children but never had. And herein lies the game's nostalgic power. *SMB* offers us an illusory trip to a past that never was.

But *Super Meat Boy* is not only about replaying a past that never was. The game likewise assists us with our future platforming adventures, both in and outside of his treacherous world. Juul (2010) argues as much, saying: "The game that successfully manages to get a player to

start and keep playing adds to that player's knowledge of conventions. To play a new game is to learn new skills and conventions. The history of games leads up to your playing of an individual game; your playing of that game paves the way for playing future games" (p. 77). With this in mind, we can say that *SMB* is not just a love letter to the games and gamers of yesteryear – gesturing in more and less obvious ways to memorable titles past and present. *Super Meat Boy*'s tight gameplay and unique balance of difficulty and punishment works to "reset" the uneven history of platformers by demonstrating that "difficult" need not be synonymous with "unfair," and that poor design choices are better left in the past.

Endnotes

(1) As of the writing of this essay, the current PC version contains eight worlds.

References

Fenty, S. (2008). Why old school is cool: A brief analysis of classic video game nostalgia. In Whalen & Taylor's (Eds.) Playing the past: History and nostalgia in video games (pp. 19-31). Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press.

Figure 1. Image captured from http://store.steampowered.com/app/40800/

Juul, J. (2009). Fear of failing: The many meanings of difficulty in video games. In Perron & Wolf's (Eds.) The video game theory reader 2 (pp. 237-252). New York: Routledge.

Juul, J. (2010). A casual revolution: Reinventing video games and their players. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. Super Meat Boy. (2011). Game Developer, 18(4), n.p. Super Meat Boy's 90s Commercial. [video file]. Retrieved from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZQZeQSaXwR8

Yin-Poole, W. (2012, Jan. 3). Super Meat Boy sells over 1 million. Eurogamer.net. Retrieved from http://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2012-01-03-super-meat-boy-sells-over-1-million