

SMBA DEV DIARY #2

How did the team deal with the challenges of updating an existing franchise? E.g. taking Monkey Ball fans into consideration, deciding which elements of the original games to keep, a British developer working on a huge Japanese franchise.

The History

It's not everyday that a small but respected British developer gets the chance to work on a huge license that originated in Japan. At first the proposal was overwhelming and we wondered at our ability to do the franchise justice, but then we realised that the easiest way to approach was as any other game we develop; what is the core gameplay and what do we want the experience to be?

In previous versions of Super Monkey Ball the player experiences the game through a monkey in a ball and has to negotiate a variety of puzzle stages in order to complete the game. In addition to this, and arguably the more popular aspect of the previous releases, was the inclusion of the mini-games.

When Sega first approached us over the development of the next title they were keen to take Super Monkey Ball in a different direction. It was important that the core of the game still remained along with the mini-games but it was just as important for the new worlds to be fun places to be. We were lucky enough that Sega and Nagoshi-san (creator of Super Monkey Ball) to give us the freedom to come up with the ideas for the gameplay and pretty much a blank sheet with regards to what the world looked like.

The Realisation

Throughout the development of the game we've had a very close relationship with Sega. We've been able to get feedback on all aspects of the game at an early enough stage to ensure that their vision and ours could be realised.

One thing that became abundantly clear to us was having the ability to use all of the additional ball mechanics in the main game rather than keep them separated to the minigames. This did provide us with a problem of ensuring that game could not be broken when using these abilities, especially when a task was developed with a specific ball-mode in mind. However, given the abundance of minigames that previous Super Monkey Ball games had we had to pare this down to a manageable number. We wanted to have around five good, solid mini-games in Adventure three of which were to come from previous titles.

Working closely with Sega we eventually chose Race, Boxing and Target, not only for the fun of the gameplay but it also gave us the widest choice of gameplay mechanics. We also realise that there will be fans out there wondering why their favourite minigame didn't make the cut. Well, maybe it didn't – get over it!!!

Along with those three we also developed a further three games; Tag, Bounce and Cannon, details of which will be forthcoming.

Probably one of the biggest issues we had was getting the feel of the game right. In the very beginning Nagoshi-san allowed us to interpret the gameplay from the original titles. As we released each milestone we were still not happy with the handling as we were missing that quintessential feel of what Super Monkey Ball was all about. Nagoshi-san kindly gave us guidance and the astounding knowledge he had of the game so that we could tweak our engine and physics to match as closely those that fans of the game are used to. The result is something that is very close but has additional subtleties that allowed us to further tweak the gameplay to suit what we wanted to achieve.

Recently we attended the first preview launch of the game at London Zoo and were extremely pleased with the reaction that we got from the press – although at the time of writing we haven't seen the previews yet, so fingers crossed! It was apparent that there were a number

of Super Monkey Ball fans in the audience that were very sceptical over how Super Monkey Ball would transfer to an adventure realm. From the feedback we had on the day it seems that we have been able to achieve our aim; to take Super Monkey Ball in a new direction that not only fits with previous versions of the game but gives the player a completely new and refreshing world in which to have fun!