eview: Mario's Game Gallery

by Eileen Mullin

Type: Children's puzzle game collection
Publisher: MacPlay (800/4-MACPLAY)
Retail Price: $39.95
Street Price: $29.95
Requires: 256-color Mac with System 7.0 or higher; 1.7 MB RAM; 7 to 10 MB free hard disk space; CD-ROM drive
Protection: None

acPlay, the Macintosh division of Interplay, has released electronic versions of many popular board games (including Scrabble and Monopoly) and has previously licensed Nintendo's Mario for its Mario Teaches Typing game. Now, building upon the Reese's Peanut Butter Cup strategy of combining two great tastes in ones, MacPlay has introduced Mario's Game Gallery, a collection of five popular children's board games featuring the short, mustachioed video game star.

Even if your kids are unfamiliar with the Super Mario characters (i.e., you've locked them up and thrown out the television), they're likely to feel right at home navigating the electronic versions of the classic games in this collection: Checkers, Go Fish, Dominoes, Backgammon, and Yacht (similar to the trademarked game Yahtzee). The game's main screen shows Mario beside a large sign board bearing the names of the five games. Clicking one of the game titles or typing the first letter of the name launches that game.

The installation procedure offers two options, with one requiring less hard disk space (7 MB versus 10 MB) at the expense of some sound quality. All of Mario's spoken lines are transcribed at the bottom of the game screen, so you can play just as easily with the sound and music turned off. Adults are likely to tire of Mario's voice and exaggerated accent rather quickly, and may find that playing with the sound turned off is definitely preferable.

ou can personalize play by entering your name, which appears above your score in all game modules. After you type in a name it will continue to appear with each round of play until it is manually changed. There are no cumulative statistics that accrue for individual players, however. Other options include turning the sound and music on and off, and displaying help screens.

Checkers. This game features the best animated sequences in Mario's Game Gallery, in the form of cartoon game pieces that creep from square to square as you and Mario choose your moves. After you select one of the game piece options — called Yoshis and Koopas — you attempt to capture all of Mario's piece via the rules of traditional checkers. You can activate a "forced jump" option that compels you to use a turn to capture one of Mario's pieces whenever you have an opportunity to do so. This way, even if you overlook a chance to capture one of his pieces you won't be allowed to make another move. You can disable this option at any point during the game, though, if you change your mind about what kind of move you want to make next.

Go Fish. In Go Fish, you win by filling up "books" of identical cards bearing the likeness of one of the Mario characters; four cards equal one book. On each turn you first have an opportunity to ask Mario for cards of a particular type. If he holds any of those cards, he will hand them over; otherwise, you need to "go fish" from the reserve card pile. Similarly, Mario will ask you for certain cards ("Do you have any... Princesses?") but your response is controlled by the computer.

Dominoes. In this version of Dominoes, you and Mario race to be the first to use up all your pieces by pairing one of your dominoes with a piece on the gameboard bearing   a matching picture. To put a domino into play, you click on the chosen piece, drag it to the domino field, and click again in the area you want to release it. Your kids may need to be very precise about where they want to place their piece, or face frustration in having the computer return their piece to their hand. If you can't match a domino on the board, you must draw new

dominoes from the Boneyard (reserve pile)   until you can find a piece you can use.

Yacht. In Mario's rendition of the Yahtzee game, you and Mario each have 12 turns to roll three sets of dice and try to obtain the highest combination in an equal number of scoring categories. The computer scorecard lets you see what categories you could apply your current roll to, and how many points you can gain in each of those categories as a result. You're not privy to the similar calculations for Mario's rolls, so determining his strategy requires more brain-power on your part.

Backgammon. As in traditional backgammon, your goal is to be the first to remove all your pieces from the game board via rolls of the dice. You move your pieces clockwise through your inner and outer tables, and Mario moves his pieces counterclockwise. Your game pieces consist of the animated Yoshis or Koopas that also appear in Checkers. And as in Checkers, you have the option to turn off the animated sequences, but why would you want to?

ummary. Mario's Game Gallery offers attractive, entertaining versions of several classic children's board games. Kids won't need to be fans of the Mario games in order to enjoy the collection, but it will make a fine introduction to the games for young video game fanatics more familiar with Bowzers than backgammon. Younger children will enjoy the cartoons and animated sequences without caring so much about actually playing the games. The CD is largely empty, although it does includes demo versions of other several other MacPlay games. There is also a disk-only version of Mario's Game Gallery which is being offered by the mail-order companies for the same price as the CD version.

Pros

- Animated game pieces are a joy to watch.
- Useful, on-screen rules and instructions
- Good-quality theme music and sound effects
- Positive reinforcement messages given to players (e.g., "Mario thinks you're fantastic!" and "I really enjoy playing with you!")

Cons

- Mario's voice, exaggerated accent, and canned phrases quickly grow wearisome.
- No settings for two players to compete against each other instead of the computer.
- Occasional unexpected game crashes.