Lance Barr Interview
interviews - For our final story in our 20th Anniversary celebration of the NES, Nintendojo interviews the designer of everyone's favorite old-school gaming system, Lance Barr.
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Interviewee(s): Chad Margetts & M. Noah Ward

One of the most distinguishing and memorable elements of the Nintendo Entertainment System was its design. In its day, it had a futuristic aesthetic that has now transitioned into cultural icon status. The NES is alive and well, on t-shirts and other fashion accessories like the infamous Captain N power pad belt buckle. The GBA SP also got a special NES-styled skin.

We were lucky to score an interview with Lance Barr, the case designer for the American versions of the NES and Super NES. Over 20 years later, Lance still works at Nintendo's offices in Redmond, Washington. While Lance is much less visible than other members of the Nintendo team, his designs are an integral part of Nintendo's success.

Nintendojo: How did you end up working for Nintendo?
Lance Barr: I interviewed for a part time, temporary design position with Nintendo while I was still in college. After I graduated, a full time design position was available.

ND: What do you do for Nintendo now?
LB: My title is Product Design Director. I manage both graphic design and industrial design projects within Nintendo of America.

ND: Can you tell us about the prototype process and inspiration for the final case design of the NES?
LB: The original design of the NES was worked out over several months including a stay of a couple of months while I worked in Japan at NCL. The design was conceived as a wireless, modular system, designed to look more like a sleek stereo system rather than a electronic toy. After the first public showing in the US at the Consumer Electronics Show, I was asked to redesign the case based on new engineering requirements. To reduce costs, the wireless function was eliminated, as well as some of the modular components such as the keyboard and data recorder. But the biggest change was the orientation and size requirements to accommodate a new edge connector for inserting the games. The new edge connecter was a "zero force" design that allowed the game to be inserted with low force, and then rotated down into the "contact" position. The case had to be designed around the movement of the game, and required the shape and size of the NES to grow from the earlier concepts. Many of the features remained, such as the two-tone color, left and right side cuts, and overall "boxy" look, but the proportions change significantly to accommodate the new edge connector.

ND: When it came time to redesign the classic NES, why did you decide to go in such a different direction, rather than shrink the original console design, like Sony did with the PSone and Slim PS2?
LB: We considered a reduction in scale, but the point of the redesign was reduction in manufacturing costs so everything was evaluated. The redesigned NES did not use the "zero force" connector, but instead relied on a direct insert connector. Form following function, the new connector placed the game 90 degrees to the main PCB and eliminated much of the bulk needed for the old electronics and connector. The redesign was made several years after the original, which was designed in 1984. The boxy look was out and I thought it was time for a more sleek and inviting look.

ND: What do you think about your prototype designs being on display at Nintendo World Store?
LB: Well, I put them there--so I think they look great. We don't get to show our old systems or models very often, so I took the opportunity to display these prototypes a the Nintendo World store knowing that many Nintendo fans would appreciate seeing some of our history.

ND: How do feel about the fact that the NES design has inspired the industry and generations of gamers? People love the original NES, and specifically the controller, as evidenced by t-shirts, belt buckles, etc.
LB: As a designer you are always making new, and hopefully better designs and products, so as you move on to the latest project, it's great to look back on some of the things that people noticed and appreciated. When I designed the controller, I never thought it would be the icon that it has. But I have to tell you, it's weird when my daughter comes home wearing the NES controller design on her shirt.

ND: What do you think about the Generation NEX, strictly from a design standpoint?
LB: Not many new products are dual-tone any more. The dual colors and overall detailing give the design a dated look--which may be fine for a system that can play classic games.

ND: The Super NES design is quite square compared to the Super Famicom. What was your motivation for going in that design direction?
LB: The Super Famicom was maybe okay for the market in Japan. For the US, I felt that it was too soft and had no edge. We were always looking at future modular components (even the NES had a connector on the bottom), so you had to design with the idea of stacking on top of other components. I though the Super Famicom didn't look good when stacked and even by itself, had a kind of "bag of bread" look.

ND: Why is it that all the case designs have been handled by NCL from 1995 on? Do you have any input into those designs at this point, in order to ensure American appeal?
LB: Individually designing a product for a given market would definitely appeal to more consumers, and would be seen as having a more current, in style look. Because of the low cost of packaging, companies almost always individually design for each market--regardless of the

language requirements since they know that for the cost, you can better reach your intended audience. But with products, the realities of manufacturing and time to market make it necessary to design in a single, world-wide style. Nintendo started to do this beginning with Nintendo 64. Of course the down side of this is that a given design never quite fits the needs of a particular market as well as it could had it been specifically designed for that market. Within these bounds, Nintendo localizes the hardware for each market, mainly through variations in color.

ND: What are your favorite and least favorite pieces of Nintendo hardware you designed?
LB: My favorite is the Hands Free controller for the NES. We were able to design for a very specific video game fan, and the design was both functional and aesthetically graceful. My least favorite--tough question, since I shouldn't be designing anything I don't like. I always thought that if I had the time, I would have liked to make the original NES even better.

ND: What non-Nintendo consoles (current or past) do you think have the best and worst design?
LB: Besides the old Atari systems with the fake wood grain on the sides, I thought the Jaguar looked rather like a toilet. I always thought the Neo-Geo system was uninspired. I liked the old Atari 7800. It had a nice, clean, high-tech look. The Sega Dreamcast had a great, fresh look, that was a nice departure from previous systems.

ND: If you could give advice to those who design consoles for the next 20 years what would you say?
LB: Play video games to understand what you are designing for. Don't get too caught up in making a stand out design. Video game systems are the opposite of cars--most consumers buy a car for what it looks like and not so much for the performance. With a video game console, although the design is the face of the system, consumers care more about the performance than the exterior design.