

My formative years were spent playing a metric ton of 3D platformers. Super Mario Sunshine, Crash Twinsanity, Sonic Adventure, Sly Cooper, Gex: Enter the Gecko, Super Mario 64 DS, Super Mario Galaxy... yeah pretty much every Mario game is in that list. You might notice my channel tends to sway toward mostly Nintendo-like experiences, and that's no coincidence. Years of playing Mario, Zelda, Kirby, Smash Brothers, and Pokemon will do that to ya. The era I grew up in seems to have been abandoned in favor of shooters, older retro revivals, rogue-likes, multiplayer battle royales. Outside of Yooka-Laylee, which was met with lukewarm critical reception, the 3D platformer torch has almost exclusively been held by Mario since the days of the Gamecube. As someone who made a video dedicated to defending Yooka-Laylee and the collectathon subgenre, even I have to admit that Yooka-Laylee wasn't an ideal comeback. My video was spurred by the seemingly off-base criticisms of collectathons as a whole, rather than the level-headed criticisms of the game itself. It had camera problems, a lack of polish, strange objective design, and not even the controls were 100% reliable. Numerous patches for the game have since been added, but its time in the spotlight has slowly faded.

Suffice to say, Yooka-Laylee didn't make the splash fans had hoped it would, and whether all those criticisms were valid or not is a moot point. We've moved to other offerings, other adventures, other mascots. A Hat in Time specifically cites inspiration from Mario 64, Banjo-Kazooie, and Psychonauts, clearly showing Gears for Breakfast has a penchant for platformers other than Banjo-Kazooie. We all **know** Super Mario Odyssey is gonna be fantastic, harkening back to ideas presented in 64 and Sunshine; however, he can't carry an entire genre on his back. What does A Hat in Time offer as a love letter to the Gamecube, **and** as a worthy contender to the genre as a whole?

As a disclaimer, I did receive a review copy for the game well in advance. If that doesn't bother you, neither will the video.

Right off the bat, I can affirm that A Hat in Time's priorities are well-placed. A few seconds in Mafia Town and I instantly grew accustomed to the way Hat Girl moves. Journeying back to Super Mario 64 this year has given me a lot to appreciate about other 3D platformers. Mario controlled well in courses like Bob-Omb Battlefield and Whomp's Fortress; yet, nosedived in courses like Tick Tock Clock and Rainbow Ride. His controls were a good fit for sprawling terrain, not for small platforms and bottomless pits. A Hat in Time has a grasp on fluid control not unlike Super Mario Sunshine. Hat Girl has the infinite range of analog movement, a double jump and dive cancel for midair course correction, the dive itself for extended jump length, and wall running which can be used to wall jump, or to grab the ledge of a platform you would have missed otherwise. It would be one thing if she simply controlled well, but the platforming is well-built with your abilities in mind. Sometimes you'll be asked to jump, let yourself fall below a wall in your way, and then use the double jump to finish the job. By no means is it revolutionary, that cognitive leap only lasts a few seconds; nevertheless, the fluidity with which you zip around the various levels is astounding coming off the restrictive, "technically polished" controls of Super Mario 3D World. Long have I waited for a game character to control as ambitiously as Mario did with a FLUDD pack. Since there's so much room for error in Hat Girl's jump abilities,

precise platforming is as easy as it's ever been. Platforms can be spaced out pretty far because the dive cancel is such an effective tool for reorienting. It's also fun to run around and jump in places where it's not required, and if that isn't a sign of an overwhelming success, I don't know what is.

In many cases, a 3D camera system must complement an intuitive control scheme. What's the good in knowing exactly what buttons to input when you can't see where you're supposed to land? A Hat in Time is designed so that camera snafoos are a non-issue. Options are present that allow you to choose how close or far the camera is by default, and most levels are designed with sufficient room for the camera. Murder on the Owl Express is a collection of small rooms, and the camera didn't once even slightly irritate me. Wherever Hat Girl moves, the camera moves in that direction with her, and in cases where you need a better view of your surroundings, you can either move the camera with the right stick, or hold the triangle button to zoom out. Surprisingly enough, the camera is probably the easiest to screw up, as was often the case in Yooka-Laylee, which shoehorned fixed camera angles alongside free-form camera control. A Hat in Time will sometimes use a fixed camera angle for boss fights, but the contrast between fixed and free-form is bridged by cut-scenes, rather than by wandering into a new area.

Mafia Town is well-suited to a beginner's course, with no bottomless pits, fairly simple enemies, and a focus on navigation rather than tight platforming; you get used to the camera and controls, and store that information to be used later on. It contrasts well with the fourth world, Alpine Skyline, which has an abundance of bottomless pits, invisible enemies that can steal your hat as well as your pons, exploding chicken eggs, and a focus on interesting platforming challenges. Aside from this general scaling, A Hat in Time doesn't follow a strict difficulty template. Battle of the Birds has a straight, linear platforming challenge on a crumbling train, yet in the same world there's a sandbox pavilion where you take pictures and save corgis in an effort to become a diva. In an almost role reversal, that pavilion then turns into a dangerous hotbed of celebrity fanfare, where you need to lead a marching troupe to various places; then the aforementioned train is earlier used in a murder mystery where you instead need to avoid line of sight with the crows and gather evidence to convict the murderer.

Of course, none of this variety ever takes away from the game's platforming roots, it's not as if the game turns into L.A. Noire where you interview suspects, question their innocence, and gather traditional evidence; it's moreso a collection of platforming challenges centered around you attempting to avoid detection, and gathering case files that act as evidence, with some clever dialogue sprinkled in. Battle of the Birds in general is one of my favorite worlds, because it manages to tell a narrative via the feud between DJ Grooves and the Conductor. The world is framed as a "Battle of the Birds", an owl versus a penguin. Based on the high scores you get for each of the bird's missions, you can completely alter the finale. I'm impressed by how far this game goes to tell a cohesive narrative for each world you visit, and while I don't think it ever reaches the same creative heights as Battle of the Birds, Subcon Forest has one character who is so entertaining in his entirety, that it hardly matters. His writing and voice acting is superb, a general note the game lands for every character. Even the mafia, who are pretty generic villains,

talk with an inflection that totally sells their stupidity. Unfortunately, sometimes voice acting is omitted entirely, and while I'm fine with this in games where the divide is more obvious, A Hat in Time is quite ambiguous. Some cut-scenes have fully voiced characters talking alongside unvoiced characters, and that can become quite jarring. Especially when the characters who stop talking, had voices only moments ago.

Minor missteps don't take away from the writing as a whole, however. One of the strongest pieces of writing in this game is unvoiced. All I'll say about it is "Corgi Text Adventure", please seek this out the moment you get the game it is as unbelievably cute as it sounds. Somewhere hidden in her ship is a diary with unique entries based on whichever mission you've just completed, and is written from the perspective of a little girl. The central antagonist, Moustache Girl, has shaky and immature motives on the outset. Until you remember that she's a little girl with a relatively selfish worldview, befitting of her age and understandable given her upbringing in the oppressive Mafia Town. Themes of friendship and loneliness are confronted through a childish lens, for sure, though it's a lens that can be understood by anyone of any age. It doesn't have anything new or interesting to say about the subject, it just frames the story in an incredibly cute way.

A Hat in Time attempts to stray away from tradition in every sense of the word. Mafia Town is a Sunshine-like level: open-world, but with missions that change something about that world. Unlike Mario Sunshine, though, this game saves your progress toward non-mission related objectives like the colored safes. Battle of the Birds is a feud between two bird directors trying to make movies with you as the actress, and as such have missions that take place in three completely different areas. Subcon Forest lets you pick and choose which missions you're allowed to complete via contract, and Alpine Skyline is completely free-roam. Pons are treated as currency, and are not needed for a 100 pon Time Piece or anything. Instead, you can collect pons of your own volition, to purchase badges from this creepy merchant, or to repair relic podiums and open a time rift hidden somewhere in the world. This solution keeps pon collecting important right up until the end, while foregoing the frustrating aspects of collecting 100 coins, or every hidden blue coin in Super Mario Sunshine. Pons are required to 100% the game, that is true: but instead of framing pons as strictly necessary, you can instead collect pons at your leisure knowing that the game will place enough for you that you never have to worry. Badges offer unique abilities ranging from a magnet to pull nearby pons into you, a hookshot to use as a grappling hook, and there's even a camera badge that lets you press select at any time to frame a picture. There are options for depth of field and free camera movement to take whatever cute shot of Hat Girl you desire. I'd just like to point out that this game sports a feature that Super Mario Odyssey promoted heavily in the most recent Nintendo Direct, almost a month before it even comes out. Even cooler is that each badge you equip is sewn onto whatever hat you're wearing, as both a visual reminder of what badges you have equipped, as well as an aesthetically pleasing customizable tool. The game isn't afraid of switching Hat Girl's design, either. Each of the 6 hats have unique functions, as well as different looks for each hat. My favorite is an alternate design for the Sprint Cap which turns it into a reptile face, it's so cute. You can change hair and clothing colors, you can change the music of each level, and you get

each of these upgrades via a roulette after a rift challenge, or in your ship for 3 rift tokens scattered throughout the world, yet another instance of a collectable that is in no way required, but rewarding to collect. Still don't have everything on that roulette, and that excites me to keep playing and find all the alternate hat designs.

Hats are not just aesthetic, as I mentioned there's a hat that lets you sprint, a hat that turns you into an ice block, among other functions that can either be used in specifically designed platforming sections, or a universally helpful ability as is the cast with the Sprint Cap. There is one cap near the end of the game which sees little to no use, and though it has its uses when fighting enemies, I admit that I rarely found myself putting it on. Thankfully, if you need to quickly switch to a different hat, all you need to do is select from a quick menu. You can switch to the Snow Cap to turn into an ice block, and then quickly switch back to the Sprint Cap seamlessly. I would imagine this is very helpful for speedrunners, and the Beta already has a huge community around it. Though I rarely skip cutscenes since they really are that entertaining, for both speedrunning purposes and general use, there's an option to skip all cutscenes automatically, a clear sign that the game promotes several different playstyles.

A Hat in Time's greatest strength is in its sense of humor and charm, which both bleed into the gameplay in surprising ways. Some of the stunts this game pulls in regards to messing with your mind harken back to many of the tricks Undertale pulled by messing with the interactive medium in creative ways. Subcon Forest has you sign multiple contracts, but there's a really cute twist in the final chapter that I do not wish to spoil. A few of these moments had me burst out laughing in the solitude of my own home, something I assure you **never** happens. Even some of the replies you can select had me grinning from ear to ear, like being allowed to select "heck no" as opposed to "yes". Little things like that are enough to capture a sucker like me into this cute as heck universe. There's nothing traditionally difficult outside of the very well executed boss fights, some of the best in the genre. Absolutely fantastic and adrenaline pumping background music, paired with a load of different attacks that ramp up in complexity as the fights go on. The Mafia Boss goes from jumping around the room, to shooting grounded shockwaves, eventually in sync with bouncing shockwaves, to him throwing knives everywhere, to him rolling up a ball of mafia members to crush you with. This is also the simplest it ever gets. There is not a single boss fight I disliked, with special mention to the final boss fight that's quickly become one of my favorites.

The soundtrack in general has an extremely wide range, from western, to electronic, to fast-paced rock: it hits every note you'd want in any game. Special mention to the theme for the Time Rifts, my god it's magical.

A Hat in Time is a fantastic mash-up of what worked from the specific era it references, while adding small improvements to some things that may not have worked as well as we remembered. Focus was put on making collecting fun, and presenting a staunch variety of objectives that are each memorable in their own way, either because of the hilariously well-written dialogue, or the unique premise of that act. Many of the most memorable and enjoyable acts aren't even traditionally challenging, because collectathons never necessarily

needed bottomless pits or intelligent enemy AI to excel. Instead, there's a focus on charm, variety, and framing each platforming challenge in a creative way. Despite this, I do feel that A Hat in Time is a great homage, rather than a great innovator. While it did improve some dated aspects of the genre, I can't say it did anything decidedly new that isn't surface level. I appreciate it enough that it doesn't bother me much, but as for the future of the genre I think other titles like Super Mario Odyssey really need to push the envelope further. A Hat in Time is a much more enticing start than Yooka-Laylee, but it's still only a start. One thing I can say is that this game fits in with the Gamecube era perfectly, and I think even surpasses some of those older games. It is deceptively cute, hilariously written, varied, and frankly a lot more exciting than anything in Yooka-Laylee. No boundaries will be pushed today, but I think we'll all be reminded as to just what makes this genre great, and hopefully it signals the start of a return to form for a genre I used to love dearly.

I don't know if I've ever done a "review" in the traditional sense of the word. If you liked it and want to see more, consider supporting me on Patreon! Tons of amazing people are already supporting me, and I would really appreciate it if you have the cash to spare. If not, that's completely fine, but I do ask that you at least engage with the video. Comment your thoughts, get some discussion going, maybe like or share the video. At the very least, I hope you enjoyed it! My name has been KingK and I certainly hope you have some well-deserved fun today!