

# Blaster Master

a game evaluation by Austin Krauss for CIS 587, Fall Term, 2003

## Introduction

During the mid to late 1980s, several third party publishers and development studios were created and attempted to establish themselves as dominate companies that could harness the power of the Nintendo Entertainment System. One such company was Sunsoft, an up and coming Japanese development house specializing in addictive 2D platformers with unique game play. It is well known that 2D platformer games were created in abundance during the days of the NES; successful titles were soon mirrored with half a dozen knockoffs. *Blaster Master*, a Sunsoft developed game released in 1988, is a 2D platformer at heart but adds elements of game play native to RPG titles. *Blaster Master* may be considered the first such game to blend two or more genres into one unique style of game play.

## Product Overview

Title	Blaster Master (North America), Meta Fight (Japan)
Developer	Sunsoft Inc. (now defunct)
Release Year	1988
Price at Release	approximately \$49.95 - \$59.95
Hardware	Original 8-bit NES (North America) or Famicom (Japan)
Genre	2D Platform Action/Shooter

## Game Summary

*Blaster Master* takes place in an alien underground world consisting of a maze of caverns supposedly deep underground of the main character's home. The game behaves like a classic 2D platform action game, with the majority of the game centering on the player controlling a fighting vehicle. With the NES's relatively simple controller design (at least, compared to today's controllers), the primary functions of the fighting vehicle are restricted to "jump" and "shoot". More advanced controls can be enabled by progressing through the game. The player is to jump, fly, swim or otherwise maneuver to desired goals, while simultaneously destroying all enemies in his or her path.

*Blaster Master's* unique game play style allows the player to abandon the protection of his fighting vehicle and venture out to the world on foot. In some cases, this is necessary to complete puzzles and travel to places that the vehicle can not. While in other scenarios, abandoning the fighting vehicle at the wrong time can result in near instantaneous death.

## Story Line

The game's story is simple and almost nonexistent once actual game play begins. The main character is a teenage boy named Jason. Jason's pet frog, Fred, escapes from his fish bowl and leaps on to a box of nuclear waste conveniently located in Jason's back yard. This transforms Fred into a giant mutant frog, who then escapes by entering a hole in the ground. Jason jumps down the giant hole after Fred, and finds a tank there instead of his frog. Jason decides to command the tank and begin the journey into the game world.

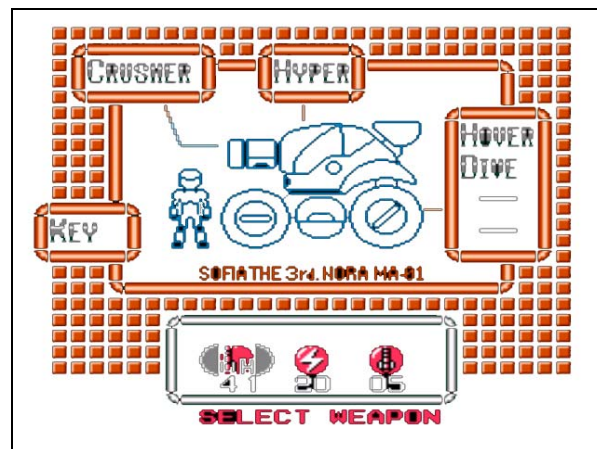
## Player's Role

The player is expected to control the fighting vehicle, known as Sofia the 3rd. When in the vehicle, the player can drive, fly, jump, and shoot enemies. When out of the vehicle and controlling Jason, the player can jump, duck, shoot bullets, and throw grenades. The player is expected to maneuver through each level in Sofia and defeat the level "mutant boss" using only the abilities of Jason. The ultimate goal of the player is to reach the final level and destroy the "master boss".

## User Interface

The player health gauges and power meters on the main user interface are displayed as incremental progress bars. This approach is nice because it leaves a lot of screen area to be filled with the game world and its inhabitants. The incremental bars are used to represent the player's health, the amount of flying fuel left, and Jason's gun strength.

An additional pause menu is presented to the player showing the details of Sofia's power ups and special weapons. There is no main menu or scoring menu.



*Pause Menu*

## Game Play

The game play is the area in which *Blaster Master* excels, in my opinion. The majority of the game is played as a traditional 2D side-scroller action game, with Jason piloting Sofia through the game world trying to avoid obstacles and destroy any enemies in his path.

However, Jason also has the ability to leave the tank, and explore the world on foot. In some situations this is necessary, such as early in the game when Sofia does not have much maneuverability in the water. Jason can leave the tank and swim fast in the water to retrieve items and explore interesting places. However, if Jason leaves Sofia in a place that he can not reach, his life is virtually over, he can not make it through the game world without his tank to avoid enemies and travel to unreachable places.

The second part of the game involves Jason exploring other parts of the game world in a top-down view that can be nearly considered a 3D world. In this part of the game, we see a close up view of Jason as he uses guns and grenades to destroy enemies. Jason's goal here is to defeat a boss at the end of the level to retrieve a new power-up part for Sofia.

As Jason collects parts, Sofia gains new functionality such as the ability to fly short distances, climb walls, and obtain more powerful weapons. It is with these new abilities that the player is able to advance

through each level, with another twist being that the entrance to the next level is not always at the end of the previous level. Although I wouldn't consider this to be the type of non-linear game play that we know today, I would go so far as to say that the game play benefits nicely from this kind of nonlinear feature.

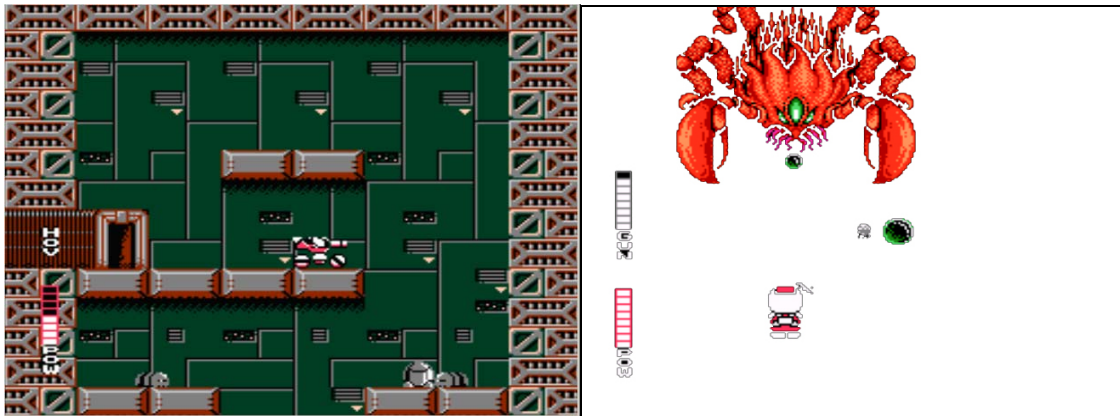
### Scoring

A game score is not kept, success is only measured according to how far the player can make it in the game.

### Artwork

The game's graphics are on par for what could be produced on the NES. The art scheme is kept consistent during each level, with the theme changing from level to level. The enemy characters are mostly one shade of gray, but are varied enough in attack style that the player will most likely not notice. Explosions and other special effects do a good job of their intended purpose, but aren't ground breaking graphics even for the NES era.

The mutant boss characters are big and fill most of the screen. They are detailed enough for the time, with menacing fangs and other appendages. A few of the early boss characters are recycled later in the game, with touched up details and a different color scheme.



### Sound and Music

Sound effects are basic and repeat often throughout the game. Most sounds like gun fire do not change throughout the game. Although the same sound effects repeat over and over throughout the game, they aren't annoying enough to heavily distract from the game play.

The background music varies from level to level, and adds a nice dimension to the theme of each level. The score for each level does repeat, but it is long enough to not appear to be in a loop. The music when fighting a level boss is an inspiring fast beat fitting perfectly the idea of a big battle.

### Special Features

"Special" features exist in the three additional special weapons that Sofia may use. These weapons are available at the start of the game, but ammunition is scattered throughout the world. The weapons consist of two types of missiles and a blast of lightning from the bottom of the tank. Although these weapons may sound useful from this description, they are hardly effective and don't add much to the already good game play.

## Manual

The game manual is a translation from a Japanese source, thus, it has some misspellings and other anomalies where things just don't seem to make sense. The manual does give hints at game play, particularly navigating through the game world to progress to the later levels. Maps are provided, but are so generic and lacking of detail that they are virtually useless. The simplistic control system and story line mean that one doesn't have to read the roughly twelve page manual to start playing immediately.

## Bugs

The game does exhibit some technical bugs; however, most don't affect game play to a great degree. Perhaps the most noticeable glitch is the frame rate slow down that occurs when approximately eight or more moving objects are on the screen at one time. In some cases this can be an advantage to the player who can take more time in evaluating options when the slow down occurs.

Another annoying bug is that Jason can potentially get stuck in an area and not be able to move or re-enter the tank. At this point the game is over and the player must reset the system and start from the beginning, as there is no way to neither kill Jason nor run out any game clock.

## Game Review

*What is the appropriate audience for this game?*

With its difficulty and different modes of game play, *Blaster Master* targeted a more experienced NES gamer. The level of violence and suggestive theme of a boy piloting a tank makes boys ages 10 - 17 the most appropriate audience to play *Blaster Master*.

*What is good (fun) about the game? Why?*

The two completely different modes of game play is the most compelling reason to play *Blaster Master* for hours on end. In each mode exists the potential to explore a vast world, although the way this is done varies greatly from level to level as certain power-ups are obtained.

The large, colorful mutant boss characters and fast paced sound track make the boss battles exciting; old-school skill of dodging flying projectiles while simultaneously trying to launch an offensive on the boss make the end battles lengthy, challenging, and memorable.

*What is bad (not fun) about the game? Why?*

*Blaster Master's* main weakness is its cheesy and later non-existent story line. Apparently, the simple story was conceived to satisfy the American audience used to following along a story type setting for platform games. The Japanese gamers were content of having a great platform game without a story all together.

Another problem with *Blaster Master* is that it is a notoriously difficult game to beat, again, supposedly because of its Japanese origins. Players may become frustrated with the fact that there is no such concept as "saving a game"; one must start from the very beginning each time the game is played. I consider myself an expert *Blaster Master* player, and although I have never finished the game, I know it takes at least 3-4 hours of consistent game play to reach the final level.

*How does it compare to similar games in the same genre and why is it better or worse than these games?*

Keeping in mind the target audience, *Blaster Master* was one of the most entertaining games in the single player 2D platformer genre. The top down view of game play had an almost RPG-like feeling of exploring dungeons and encountering strange alien creatures. It is the unique game play features that I believe make *Blaster Master* a better game than most other platformers targeting a similar audience.

### *Is the game worth purchasing?*

Obviously, the game can't be purchased at a typical retail outlet anymore. However, I would recommend playing it on an emulator or possibly picking up a used copy to play on actual NES hardware. Gamers today would probably be most interested in studying the game play mechanics; and I would also pay attention to the excellent level design of each unique level.

### *Are there any design mistakes present?*

- Game play is not impacted by the weak story line in any form. The story needs to be thrown out completely, or be rewritten to intertwine with the game as cut scenes between levels or by other means.
- The special weapons given to Sofia are useless save for the Homing Missiles. The Thunder Break and Multi Warhead missiles rarely hit their targets. Also, the ammunition for these optional weapons is sparsely placed throughout the world. Once the ammo was exhausted, it was very difficult to find additional sources of ammunition.
- Once Sofia became powered up with wall climbing abilities (in levels 6 and 7) it was very difficult to control because the tank would often attempt to walk on walls or ceilings when the player would want to jump. The learning curve to get master these abilities was far too steep in the later difficult stages of the game in my opinion. Often I would find myself falling into a pit of spikes simply because Sofia refused to jump and instead walked on the wall right into the spike pit.

### *What are the game's overall strengths?*

- Great game play; multiple modes of game play and memorable level bosses would keep the most experienced player busy for hours.
- Excellent music score. The level music seemed to fit perfectly the theme of the current level and the boss fight music was intense and added to the mood.
- Graphics that weren't stunning, but got the point across that the player was exploring a vast underground network of caves. This further added to the game mood to immerse the player in the game world.

### *What are the game's overall weaknesses?*

- Story was weak and nonexistent.
- A bit too difficult for the typical American gamer.
- Special weapons were not effective against enemies.
- Controls became difficult during later levels of the game.
- Maps in the manual were useless and confusing to refer to when playing the actual game.

### *How could it be improved?*

- Develop the story line or eliminate the story all together.
- Provide a "save game" feature.
- Rework the manual to revise sections that were lost in the English translation. Remove the maps completely or add a special map section with more detailed maps.
- Rework Sofia's optional weapons to provide more effectiveness and balance. Provide the player more sources to replenish ammunition.
- Rethink the "walk on walls" abilities of Sofia. These abilities are a nice touch to game play, but the controls should be less frustrating to use.