

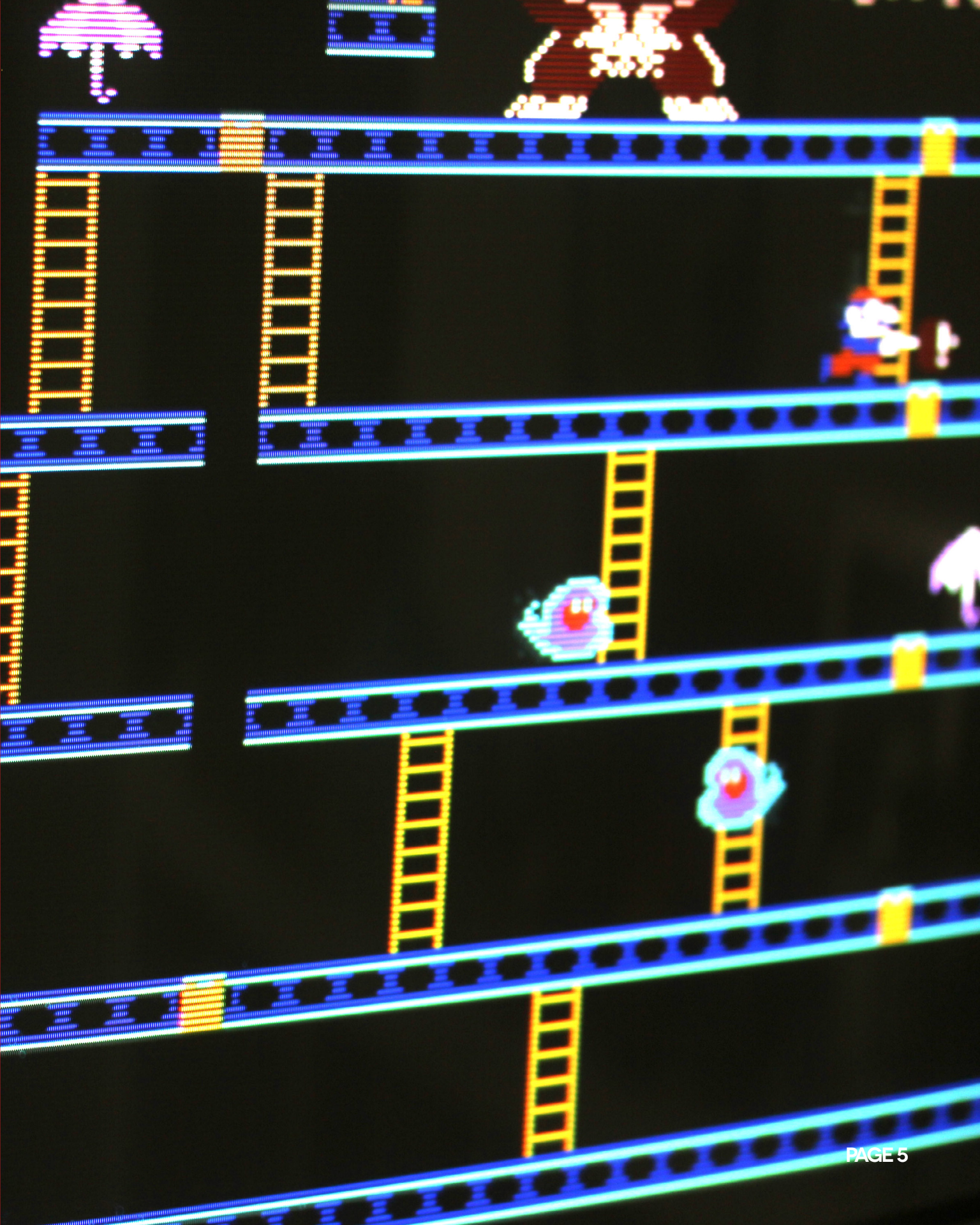
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DONKEY KONG JR. MATH

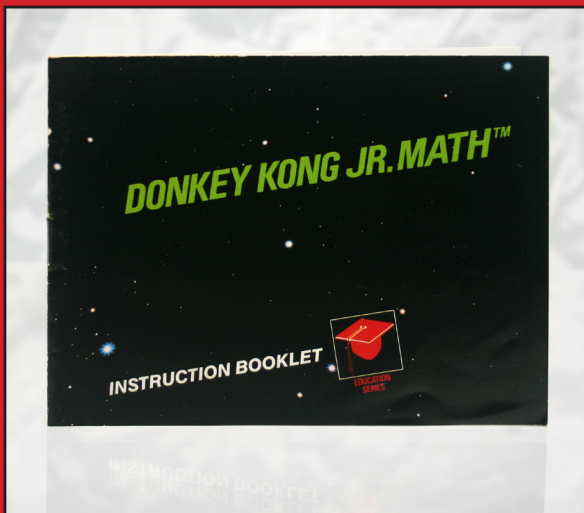
ドンキーコングJR 算数遊び • *Donkey Kong Jr. Sansuu Asobi*

Developer: Nintendo • Publisher: Nintendo

Genre: Edutainment • Release: Dec. 1983 (Japan) June 1986 (U.S.) 1986 (Europe)

NES-CA-USA

Game set courtesy of Steve Lin/The Video Game History Foundation



Before we get into *NES Works 1986* proper, we need to take care of two pieces of housekeeping: *Donkey Kong Jr. Math* and *Mach Rider*. Are these games of 1985, or of 1986?

They exist in a state of uncertainty. Officially, Nintendo categorizes them as 1985 releases, but Nintendo's official listings for NES games can be somewhat suspect.

For example, the company's official release data omits official releases for games whose publishers later went rogue. Take Tengen, which published several titles under Nintendo's license in 1987. One of those select titles was Namco's *Pac-Man*. Nintendo doesn't officially recognize *Pac-Man* as having shown up on the American NES until 1993, which is when Namco repatriated with Nintendo as a licensee and reissued the game. So Nintendo lists *Pac-Man* as a 1993 release, even though it had been available for NES under license beginning in 1987. It's a wholly political misstatement. In order to gloss over Tengen's defection from the official fold, Nintendo ignores the publisher's roster of briefly sanctioned 1987 and 1988 releases in favor of telling its own story. Perhaps that's their right, but it's a disservice to the preservation of video game history. And, in some cases, Nintendo's internal dates aren't quite right, with games having been available on the market a month or two before the official release date.

Game distribution in the U.S. was a lot looser and less obsessively documented during the NES era than it is now. Release dates often slipped around due to the vagaries of toy distribution; retailers classified video games as toys in the '80s and well into the '90s. Nintendo's own inconsistencies and complications added to the confusion. For example, *Zelda II*'s official U.S. release date ended up slipping from late 1987 to December 1988 due to chip manufacturing shortages; yet multiple reliable sources report the game did show up in America long before the end of the year, albeit in extremely tiny quantities. In short, Nintendo's official NES game release documentation should be absorbed with a grain of salt at hand. They're guidelines, seemingly written to the best of people's ability based on available info, rather gospel truth.

Which brings us to *Donkey Kong Jr. Math* and *Mach Rider*. Nintendo claims both games launched alongside the NES in 1985. But, again, several reliable external sources indicate they did not, including the *Computer Entertainer* newsletter. The only American publication actively tracking domestic console game releases at the time of the NES launch, *Computer Entertainer* indicates that neither game actually arrived at

U.S. retail until the middle of 1986.

Given the bootstrapped nature of the NES's initial holiday release, Nintendo's own data may well be somewhat off the mark here. Maybe these two oddball releases were slated to ship at the New York launch but ended up being held back at the last moment. Perhaps they did in fact ship in vanishingly small quantities on day one, only to resurface properly eight months later when the console went nationwide.

Granted, this all amounts to a lot of pointless nitpicking about a point of trivia. I mean, who really cares when an unloved and utterly marginal release like *Donkey Kong Jr. Math* actually debuted? But the uncertainty over these games, with eyewitness accounts and research contradicting Nintendo's formal documentation, speaks volumes about the ramshackle nature of the American console market at the time of the NES's debut. It speaks as well to the difficulty of documenting the ins and outs of the medium's formative days. That's why I've grouped *Donkey Kong Jr. Math* and *Mach Rider* as 1986 games, even if Nintendo says otherwise.

Again, this likely doesn't matter to much of anyone; *Donkey Kong Jr. Math* has never been anything more than a hiccup in NES history. As the title indicates, *Donkey Kong Jr. Math* attempts to showcase the "edutainment" potential of the NES by repurposing graphics from the console's rendition of *Donkey Kong Jr.* (Therein lies another oddity of the NES launch: Nintendo released this bastardization of one of their keystone creations in America before the original work itself.)

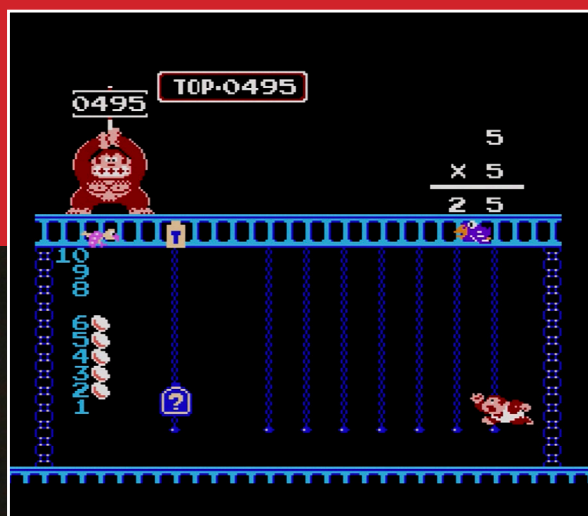
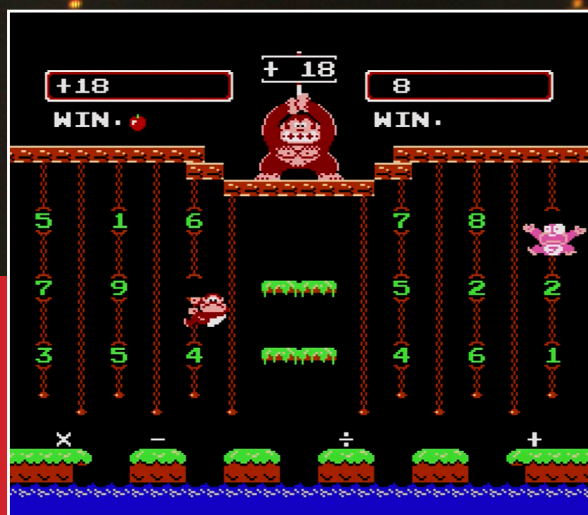
Donkey Kong Jr. Math itself holds very little appeal as a game. It offers three modes of play: "Calculate A," "Calculate B," and "Operator Exercise" all of which concern Junior creating sums by climbing vines and chains. Calculate A and B simply present two different difficulty levels for the same basic mode, which has Junior climbing vines in order to create sums. Papa Donkey Kong holds up a sign with a numeric figure on it, and your task is to grab numbers and mathematical operators to reach that sum. Mode B proves to be the more difficult of the two because you have to deal with larger figures and negative numbers, but otherwise the two modes play out identically.

According to the manual, you can play either mode solo or competitively. However, there's no real demarcation between solo and multiplayer; every match you play is presented as a head-to-head contest, with player one controlling a normal version of Junior and



DONKEY KONG JR. MATH

* CALCULATE A
CALCULATE B
+-x÷ EXERCISE
©1983 NINTENDO CO.,LTD.



player two controlling a pink palette-swap. You don't have to go up against another player, but the game is pointless without that element of competition as the pink version of Junior will simply sit in place. Absent the other player, the game offers no metric to compete against: No CPU controlled rival, no timer, no scoring. *Donkey Kong Jr. Math* may remind you of *Stack-Up* in this regard. It feels like the start of an actual game that the developers never quite got around to finishing. The "single-player mode" literally consists of playing the competitive game without a competitor, which is, frankly, not worth doing.

Operator Exercise feels slightly less pointless, in that it actually works as a single-player endeavor; in fact, it offers no multiplayer option. It therefore doesn't come off as incomplete without a second person to join in. Operator Exercise takes place in the final stage of *Donkey Kong Jr.*, with a row of chains descending from the ceiling. You begin by choosing the nature of the exercise — ranging from large sums to simple multiplication and division tasks — and complete 10 consecutive challenges doled out by the computer.

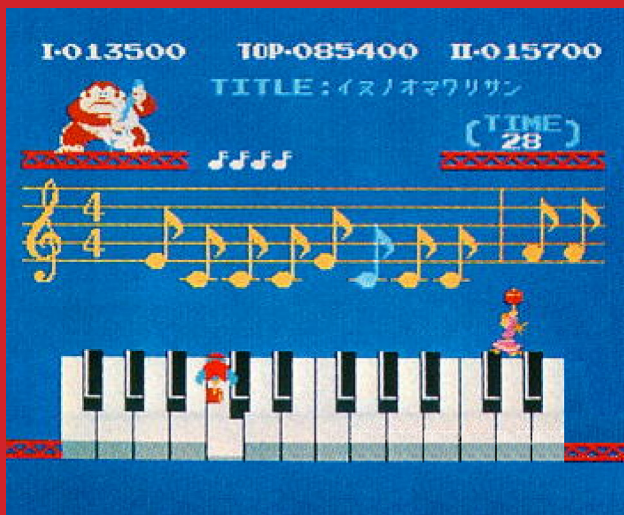
“ THE UNCERTAINTY OVER DONKEY KONG JR. MATH'S RELEASE DATE SPEAKS TO THE RAMSHACKLE NATURE OF THE AMERICAN CONSOLE MARKET AT THE TIME OF THE NES'S DEBUT.

The controls here are a little confusing and annoyingly change up slightly depending on your chosen operator. Basically, though, it works like this: Each of the changing chains connects to a different part of the target sum (ones, tens, hundreds, etc.), and you slide Junior up or down the chain to set a number for that position. Once you've set the entire sum, you drop off the chain and see whether you managed to construct a valid mathematical formula. And that's all there is to it. This is a bare-bones education game, enormously less entertaining than

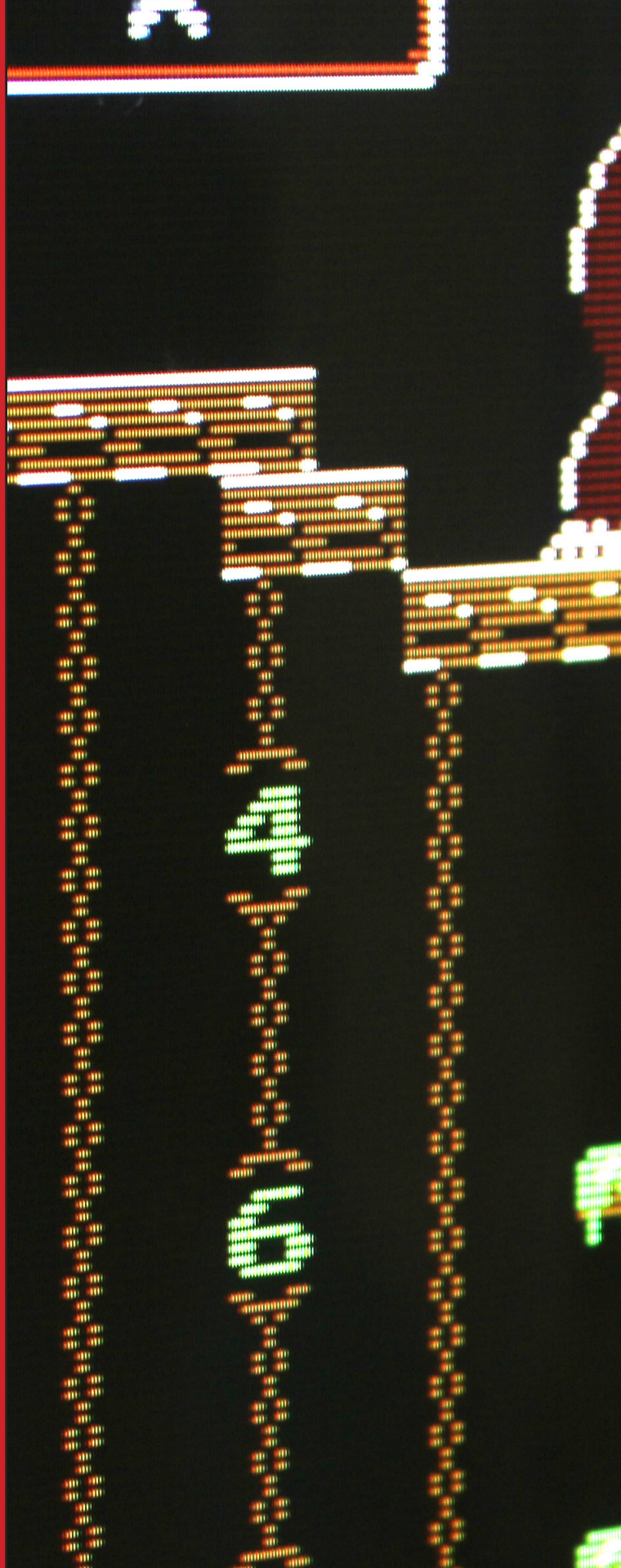
The rise and fall of NES edutainment

Donkey Kong Jr. Math hails from the very earliest days of the Famicom, when Nintendo had the daunting task before them of marketing their very own console and providing a full lineup of software for it, despite having very little in-house experience with game development. The Famicom launched with three games — *Donkey Kong*, *Donkey Kong Jr.*, and *Popeye* — and Nintendo padded out the system's early lineup by turning all three of those titles into educational releases. This is not a figure of speech: *Donkey Kong Jr. Math* is literally built from components of *Donkey Kong Jr.* In fact, The Cutting Room Floor (www.tcrf.net) indicates that the code is littered with unused elements from the original game, and the material that does appear in-game here — from sprites to audio effects — is directly adapted from the other cart. The same is true of the other Japanese educational series release, *Popeye no Eigo Asobi*.

One has to wonder if the third planned title in the series, a music tutor derived from *Donkey Kong*, ended up being scuttled because it would have featured too many original sprites to justify its development costs. The handful of images that exist online for *Donkey Kong no Ongaku Asobi* (*Donkey Kong's Music Training*) show a handful of familiar game assets alongside a number of original graphics including Kong playing upright bass and Pauline wielding a hammer, which defeats the “recycling” idea. (Nintendo never lets anything go to waste; many of these discarded sprites ended up in *Family BASIC*!)



Donkey Kong no Ongaku Asobi
(source: lostmediawiki.com)





something like, say, *Math Blasters* or *The Oregon Trail*.

Nintendo designated *Donkey Kong Jr. Math* as part of the “Education Series” of NES games, but as I mentioned in *NES Works Vol. 1*’s exploration of 1983’s Famicom releases, the word “series” is something of a misnomer. This was the only game to belong to that series. And Nintendo barely even sold it; like its fellow not-quite-complete NES launch title *Stack-Up*, *Donkey Kong Jr. Math* seemingly came into being to fill the roster and provide some flimsy justification for the console to parents (*look! the NES was fun and educational, too!*). It barely constitutes a product in its own right. It lived a short life at retail and few consumers bothered with it. As a result, it’s become by far the rarest NES “Black Box” title, with boxed complete copies selling in the neighborhood of \$1000 these days — a game no one really wants except to grudgingly complete their collection.

In a way, it’s amazing that *Donkey Kong Jr. Math* came to America at all. It feels like a relic of the Nintendo’s early console concept, which involved a furtive attempt to position the console as a modular home computer [see sidebar]. Nintendo needed a cheap way to recycle assets and flesh out its 1983 Famicom release schedule, thus: *Donkey Kong Jr. Math*. It’s truly a slapdash piece of software. One of its two modes lacks a proper single-player option, and neither mode feels especially refined or interesting. It’s a curiosity at best, a historical relic of Nintendo’s early days when they hadn’t yet landed on the concept of quality and polish as the primary distinguishing trait of their software.

The one advantage *Donkey Kong Jr. Math* has over fellow Black Box rarity *Stack-Up* is that gamers can at least slake their curiosity about its lousiness without too much difficulty. Where *Stack-Up* requires R.O.B., a working NES, a CRT television, and a small fleet of plastic doodads in order for its uselessness to come into full focus, *Donkey Kong Jr. Math* has shown up on several iterations of Virtual Console, so you can soak up its mediocrity for just a few bucks. Not that it’s worth even that much... but \$4.99 sure beats dropping four figures on a miserable cartridge, a scrap of cardboard, and a paper manual. *Donkey Kong Jr. Math* may be an educational title, but the most important lesson it has to offer today is that subtracting a large sum from your bank account for the sake of completism adds up to nothing but regret.