

A side-scrolling video game is a game viewed from a side-view camera angle where the screen follows the player as they move left or right. The jump from single-screen or flip-screen graphics to scrolling graphics during the golden age of arcade games was a pivotal leap in game design, comparable to the move to 3D graphics during the fifth generation.

In 1984, Pac-Land took the scrolling platform game a step further. It was not only a successful title,[41] but it more closely resembled later scrolling platformers like Wonder Boy and Super Mario Bros. It also has multi-layered parallax scrolling. The same year, Sega released Flicky, a simple platformer with horizontally scrolling levels and first mascot character. Namco followed up Pac-Land with the fantasy-themed Dragon Buster the following year.

Development was a culmination of their technical knowledge from working on the 1984 titles Devil World, Excitebike and Kung Fu along with their desire to further advance the platforming "athletic game" genre they had created with their earlier games. The side-scrolling gameplay of racing game Excitebike and beat 'em up game Kung-Fu Master, the latter ported by Miyamoto's team to the NES as Kung Fu, were key steps towards Miyamoto's vision of an expansive side-scrolling platformer in turn, Kung-Fu Master was an adaptation of the Jackie Chan film Wheels on Meals (1984). While working on Excitebike and Kung Fu, he came up with the concept of a platformer that would have the player "strategize while scrolling sideways" over long distances, have aboveground and underground levels, and have colorful backgrounds rather than black backgrounds. Super Mario Bros. used the fast scrolling game engine Miyamoto's team had originally developed for Excitebike, which allowed Mario to smoothly accelerate from a walk to a run, rather than move at a constant speed like in earlier platformers.

During the third generation of video game consoles, tutorials on gameplay were rare. Instead, players learned how a video game worked through being guided by level design. The opening section of Super Mario Bros. was therefore specifically designed in such a way that players would be forced to explore the mechanics of the game in order to be able to advance. Rather than confront the newly oriented player with obstacles, the first level of Super Mario Bros. lays down the variety of in-game hazards by means of repetition, iteration, and escalation. In an interview with Eurogamer, Miyamoto explained that he created "World 1-1" to contain everything a player needs to "gradually and naturally understand what they're doing", so that they can quickly understand how the game works. According to Miyamoto, once the player understands the mechanics of the game, the player will be able to play more freely and it becomes "their game."