



WATA GAMES PRESENTS

THE Definitive NES Black Box Variant Guide

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OCTOBER, 1985. Nintendo would change the course of pop culture history forever with the release of the NES and its classic "Black Box" series that debuted with 17 games, all sharing a similar style so-called for the games simple graphics and uniform Black-colored boxes. No longer would you be deceived by intricate artwork that disappointed and overcompensated for lackluster gameplay. No - - Nintendo was saying "what you see is what you get" with their pixelated 8-bit images that brought our favorite characters to life. From then through 1987 they would go on to release 13 more titles for a total of 30 Black Box games that spawned a new generation of video gaming and a slew of iconic characters that would go on to create some of the biggest franchises in pop culture today (Mario, we're looking at you!).

These 30 titles have their own historical significance, but more interestingly, they also have a chronology and release history that has never had the proper light shed upon it. Wata Games tracks all the variants that exist for NES games, but what

good does tracking it mean if it the history is still obscured? This feature will be shedding light specifically on U.S. Black Box Variants and how to properly identify them.

Many of us have collected these iconic titles for years, typically without paying much heed to the many differences that exist amongst their boxes. Since the mid-2000s, collectors have taken on the quest to track or at least make some sense to the different variations to create some semblance of how the physical components were altered over time and if there was a method to the seeming madness going on in Nintendo's factories. With the changes in the market, some are coming to identify the true rarity of earlier releases of these games, while others are misled into believing that a "Hangtab" means it was a first print. Let's dig into the progression of these boxes and why a game like Super Mario Bros. has 11 box variants!

Before we begin: A Foreword

Many years of dedicated collecting, archiving, and tracking have gone into understanding the true nature of Black Box variants--not just by us, but by many NES collectors (a big nod from us to the work of "Braveheart"). Over the past decade, countless discussions have occurred within the collecting community to make some semblance of the seemingly arbitrary existence of these iconic games different box types, yet no consensus has been reached or documented and shared publicly. Our attempt here to pull it all together is just that--it is not meant as the be-all end-all, but rather as the most extensive and accurate list available to serve as a collector resource. Many of the publicly available dates and references are fuzzy and not definitive, and truths we have discovered about the history contradict even Nintendo's public records or simple resources such as Wikipedia, even with information as simple as the true number of NES release titles (17 instead of the publicly listed numbers of 15 or 18).

At every instance of this feature we want to be clear that we are discussing Black Box "Box" variants, not Cartridge and Manual variants for black box games. Since many of the cart and manual variants follow the changes with boxes, and also because there is overlap of the cartridge and manual combinations across many box variants, we are limiting the focus on boxes to maintain a more straightforward and clear picture.

It is likely that more variants can and will be discovered over the coming decades as this hobby evolves, and that thought is exciting to us! We hope that we can rely on you, as part of the community, to fill gaps that need to be filled and add to our collective understanding of the history. After reading this, you may even discover a variant in your collection that has never been recognized. We look forward to adding to this evolving picture to clarify the history for us all and to make collecting that much more rewarding.

Let's begin: Major NES Box Variants

STICKER SEALS, HANGTABS, "REV-A," & THE SEAL OF QUALITY

If you've been collecting or buying games online, you'll certainly see (if you haven't already) words like "Hangtab," "Rev-A," "Round Seal", and "First Print" among others thrown around to

describe Black Box variants. But oftentimes it's confusing to a buyer as to what these descriptors are really pointing out, or in many cases they're only giving a snapshot of the box variant and missing the other pieces to the puzzle that identify it as to what it truly is. And to add to the confusion, you may even see information that misleads more than clarifies, such as the word "Hangtab" being incorrectly conflated with "First Print," where in reality Hangtabs exist on the first six possible box printings for NES Black Boxes. We'll begin shedding light on these changes with a brief history of some of the major changes made to NES boxes (not limited to Black Box) over its lifetime.

In October 1985, the NES was released in test markets across New York City, followed by Los Angeles by early 1986, with their original lineup of 17 Black Box titles:

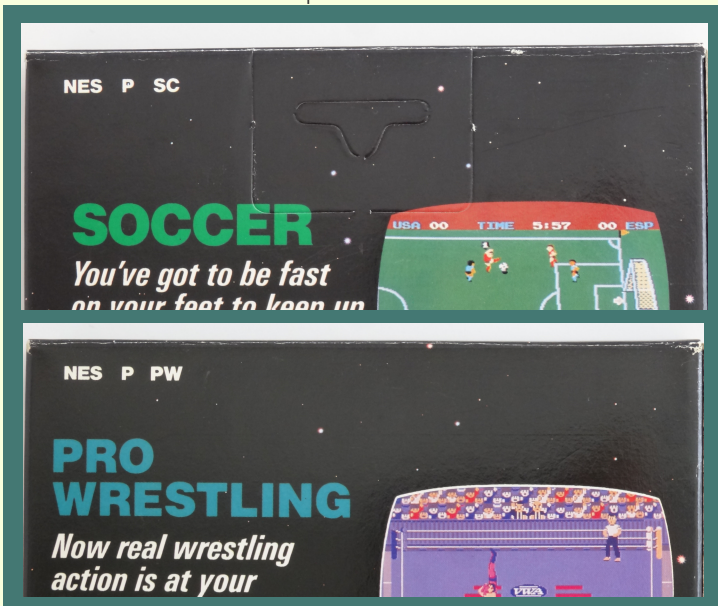
10-Yard Fight	Kung Fu
Baseball	Pinball
Clu Clu Land	Soccer
Duck Hunt	Stack-Up
Excitebike	Super Mario Bros.
Golf	Tennis
Gyromite	Wild Gunman
Hogan's Alley	Wrecking Crew
Ice Climber	



(Top Left) Matte Sticker sealed Pinball game
(Top Middle & Right) Gloss Sticker sealed Mario games
(Middle) example of a Matte sticker on a CIB game
(Bottom) example of a Gloss sticker on a CIB game

During this test market launch in 1985 through March 1986, Nintendo had not yet begun sealing their games with shrink wrap. Instead, they used a small circular sticker that read "Nintendo" on it. In 1985, these stickers were plain "Matte" paper stickers, whereas in 1986 they upgraded to a more secure, "Glossy" metallic sticker that read "VOID" when peeled off (examples seen on previous page). Sometime in 1986, Nintendo stopped using sticker seals and began shrink wrapping their games. Production was ramping up as they began shipping in larger quantities across the nation. And just like that, by the time they launched nationwide in March 1986, we had three separate box variants.

But what about these infamous Hangtabs? Well, all of the first NES games, not just Black Boxes, had cardboard Hangtabs that were perforated into the back top portion of the box. Perhaps most useful for stores when Nintendo was sticker sealing their games, these Hangtabs existed from the first games launched in October 1985 and continued through Mid-September 1987. Nintendo was the only publisher of games for the first year of the NES and in October 1986 they opened their doors to third party publishers. This is why Hangtabs are also seen on the first games released by third-party publishers between October 1986 and September 1987.



(Top) Example of a Hangtab box for Soccer
(Bottom) Example of a No Hangtab box for Pro Wrestling

So we are clear on Hangtabs, well, what about seals? And we're not talking about the shrinkwrap--we mean the Nintendo Seal of Quality that was placed on every licensed Nintendo game to show that the game was approved by Nintendo and published by a recognized licensee (unlike unlicensed games where the seal is not present). To identify the Seal of Quality, Wata uses the abbreviation "SOQ" so as not to confuse it with a

description of the method used to seal the game (such as a sticker seal versus shrink wrap seal).

We want to make it clear that there are only two types of Nintendo SOQs for the NES: Round and Oval. Don't be misled by descriptors online that reference the SOQ color, such as "White Seal" or "Black Seal." These descriptors aren't always accurate, as they can frequently be misleading since there are instances of round SOQs existing in just about every color, from black to white to gold to cyan to orange to magenta. There are also instances of games having both a circle and oval seal in the same color, so saying "white seal" here is not helpful....In creating an accurate foundation and method of identifying variants it doesn't do any good to use colors for SOQs, since it is by no means Black and White (literally!). What IS black and white is that Nintendo used Round SOQs until March 1989, and then switched to Oval SOQs, which were

used on the rest of Nintendo's products thereafter (even to this day). Within these changes there are yet more differences, and it should be noted here that the Oval SOQs have two versions: Oval SOQ with a TM next to it, and Oval SOQ with "®" next to it. Don't get too confused about this, as we'll talk more about this in the next section.

So what about Hangtabs and SOQs together? It's actually pretty straightforward. All Hangtab games have Round SOQs. Thought it was more complicated? Well, it depends on how you look at it once "Rev-A" is added to the equation. If we pay attention to the lineage, it can actually be pretty



(Top to Bottom) "Round SOQ," "Rev-A, Round SOQ" "Oval SOQ TM," "Oval SOQ R"

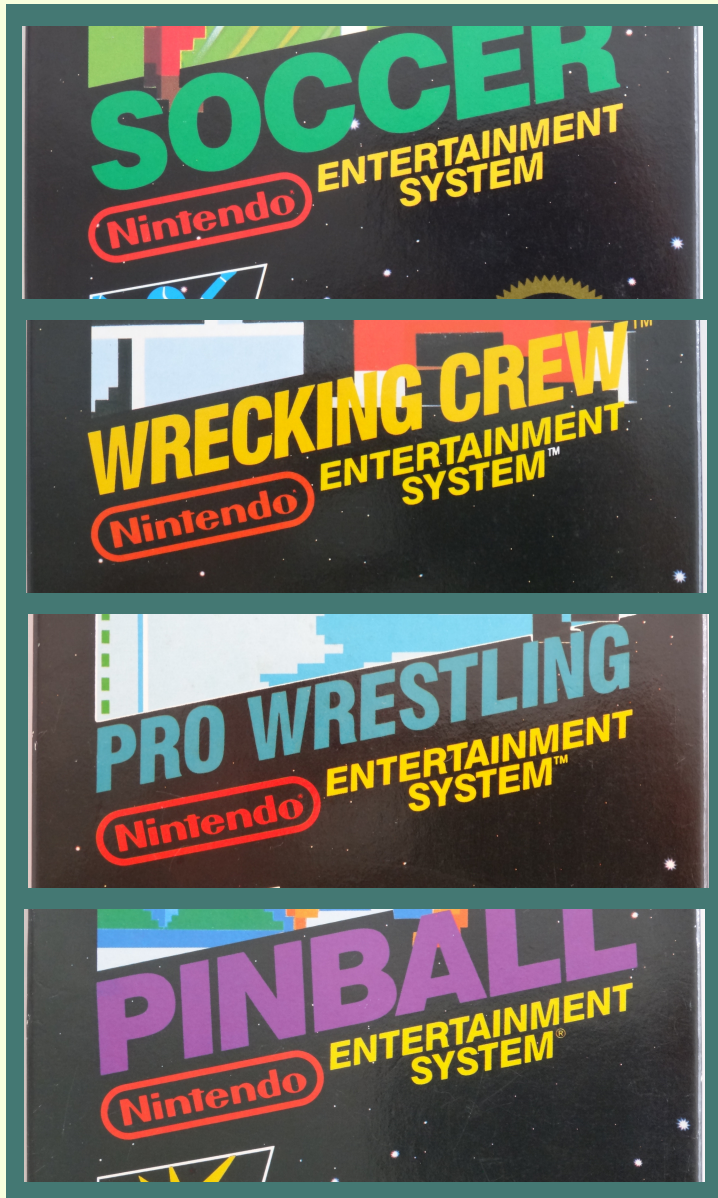
easy to understand. "Rev-A" or Revision-A was an identifier that Nintendo added to their boxes in January 1988, which was before the Oval SOQ was implemented. That's why you can find "Rev-A" present on boxes with both Round SOQs as well as Oval SOQs. However, you won't find an Oval SOQ WITHOUT Rev-A, since the addition of Rev-A happened some 15 months before the switch to Oval SOQs. "Rev-A" signified a change in design to the cartridges from the original 5 screw to the new 3 screw design. To denote it, Nintendo decided it was necessary to change the box, as well as the cart label and other pieces contained with the game. But we're only talking about Box variants in this article to keep it as simple as possible--we'll leave the other game contents for a future article.

The Black Box in-betweeners: how to identify the less pronounced variants

CODES & TRADEMARKS

We've covered some of the major variants that lay a foundation for identifying the differences in NES boxes, whether they're Black Box or not. However, there's a lot that happened in between those changes, and that's especially applicable when talking about early Black Box games. If we can conquer the complicated nature of Black Box variants, the rest of the variants for Nintendo games will be a breeze. But before we jump into the smaller details that create the robust spectrum of Black Box variants, we need to fully understand why Nintendo made the changes they did. We should start by addressing two of the major causes for these smaller changes: Codes & Trademarks.

First we'll tackle Trademarks. We start with Trademarks because the changes caused by them are not unique just to Black Box games, but to many NES titles and variants that we'll address in the future. Generally, when companies have intellectual property that they want to protect, they'll file a trademark -- this can be for a name/wordmark or an image. Once the trademark has been filed, it is standard practice to use a "TM" next to the property that has been trademarked, signifying that it is filed for protection. However, this does not mean that it was approved by the Patent office. Once the approval is made, which can sometimes take



(Top to Bottom) Soccer - No NES TM, Wrecking Crew - NES TM (White), Pro Wrestling - NES TM (Yellow), Pinball - NES R. The NES TM in Yellow was only used on the 3 Black Box titles released in 1987 (Pro Wrestling, Slalom & Volleyball).

several years, the trademark becomes "registered." Once it is registered, the TM that was used can now be switched to a "®" indicating that it is registered property.

So why does this matter? Well, Nintendo was very protective of their brand and would seek protection on just about anything they could. Therefore, many of the properties that are present on their video game boxes in the NES years would change from having no notation, to TM, to R as they progressively filed and received approval on their various trademarks (it's interesting to note that searching the U.S. Trademark database reveals that Nintendo would use "TM" long after their trademark became registered). The two pieces to look out for on NES boxes are: 1) the words "Nintendo Entertainment System" (only applicable to Black Box games) and 2) the white Nintendo Seal of Quality (SOQ) image (applicable to all NES games).

No NES-GP (Top) vs NES-GP (Bottom)

So, games could either have "No NES-TM," "NES-TM," or "NES-R." However, when Wata labels box variants, we don't include "NES-R" on these variants, and not even "NES-TM" on most later variants. This sub-variant only applies to Hangtab Black Boxes. The reason it is important to distinguish between "No NES-TM" and "NES-TM" on hangtabs is because there is a change in 1987 where the only box difference from the preceding variant is the addition of "TM" at the end of "Nintendo Entertainment System". Prior to mid-1987, no Black Box game had "NES-TM" on it, and once it was added, subsequent variants until April 1989 all contained the "TM" making identifying it superfluous and redundant. The latest variants that had "NES-R" could be more easily identified by the Oval Seal that was present on each copy, since the change to NES-R and Oval Seals happened in tandem. This means no variants exist with "NES-R" AND a circle seal. Since there are so many changing pieces, we focus on using identifiers that highlight the actual changes so that we can leave out redundancies. Otherwise, we'd be looking at variant descriptions 200 characters long by the last variants.

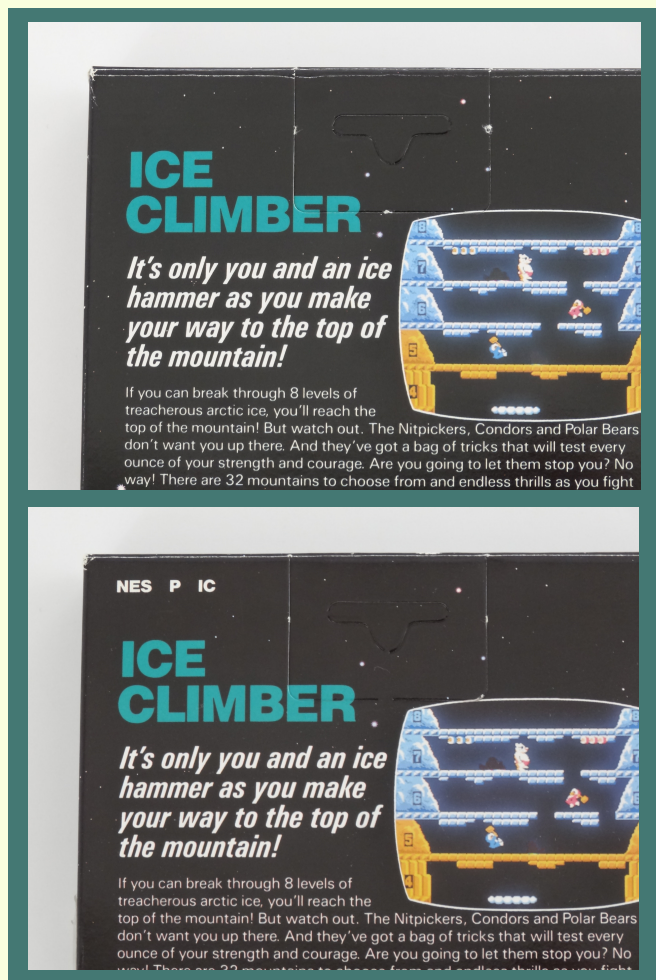
Now that we have Trademarks covered, what do we mean by "Codes?" Nintendo had two different codes that they put on their NES games, each after a certain point in the life cycle. In Late 1986, they added the first code, which was a generic code added to the back of each Black Box game above the Nintendo logo that read "Game Pak (NES-GP)". Examples of a box with and without "NES-GP" are shown at the top right of this page.

Later on in 1987 they added the game-specific code to the top left corner on the back of each box. This code was unique to each game and had letters usually related to the title, following the formula: NES P XX (with XX being the unique letters). For example, Super Mario Bros. used the code "NES P SM", Urban Champion used "NES P UC" and Slalom used "NES P SL". Examples of a code and no-code box are shown to the bottom right of this page.

When Wata labels these variants, we simply use the generic term "Code" to refer to this game-specific code, while "NES-GP" refers to the only other code verbatim so that there is no confusion between the two. Therefore, games can have either "No-Code" or "Code" listed on the variants, just as they can have "No NES-GP" or "NES-GP."



No Code (Top) vs. Code (Bottom)



The Black Sheep of Black Boxes

ANOMALIES AND ODDITIES

Before we share our visual guides we want to cover some of the strange variants that don't necessarily fit the Black Box narrative. It's important to identify these properly so that they don't become confusing when looking at everything with a wide lens and so that they can be easily recognized as outliers.

DOUBLE STICKERS



In 1985 and 1986, customers might have returned their NES game to stores. In some instances, it seems Nintendo reacquired the merchandise and resealed them with the stickers they had at the time. The top images show a Tennis that has two Matte stickers, meaning it was likely bought and resold in 1985. The bottom images show a 10-Yard Fight with a Gloss sticker over a Matte sticker, likely bought in 1985 and resold in 1986.

GLOSS STICKER WITH NES-GP



Only two releases (Gumshoe & Balloon Fight) are known to have both a Gloss sticker seal and an NES-GP code on the back. These two have only been seen paired together for games released in 1986 and the reasoning is not clear.

VOLLEYBALL "TITLE NO TM" VS. "TITLE TM"



Volleyball is the only Black Box game where the "No TM/TM" variant appears next to the title and NOT in the usual "NES TM" location. The reason is unclear, however this title is reportedly the last Black Box game released in 1987.

PROMO COPY/STAR CODE



This "Code" appears on just a few First-party (Nintendo) titles. The small white Star that appears on both of the small inner flaps at the top of the box is visible only when a box is opened. For the few titles these appear on, it is a later revision (Oval SOQ TM or R) and was used to signify that the game was not distributed as an in-store purchase but likely as a Nintendo Power giveaway. Stars can also be found on manuals (for a completely different reason, related to a new manual revision containing a rear-projection TV warning).

The Visual Guide to Black Box Collecting

BRINGING IT ALL TOGETHER

This is what we've been building up to. Wata Games has compiled the most definitive guide out there to reference so that you can track and properly identify the different Black Box variants. Included as a guide is a visual

timeline of all the different variants for Super Mario Bros. We chose this title because as the most popular Black Box game (and as a launch title), it received the most box revisions and is only one of two known titles so far containing every variant possible (Golf being the other). Also included separate to this article is a spreadsheet that maps and approximately dates what is confirmed to exist (colored **GREEN** and marked with an "X"), what can't exist (colored **RED**), what is likely to exist yet unconfirmed (colored **PURPLE**), and what is unlikely to exist yet unconfirmed (colored **YELLOW**). This spreadsheet chronicles the currently known box variants for all 30 Black Box titles.

BB

POSSIBLE VARIANT DESCRIPTORS

- 1 SEAL TYPES**
 1. Matte Sticker Seal
 2. Gloss Sticker Seal
 3. Shrink wrap
- 2 CODES (HANGTAB BLACK BOX ONLY)**
 1. "NES-CP" - Game Pak code above Nintendo logo on back of box, bottom right (1 Code)
 2. "Code" - Game Specific Code (NES P XX) on back of box, top left (2 code)
 3. "NES TM" - "TM" added after "Nintendo Entertainment System" below title on front of box, center right (3 code)
- 3 MAJOR NES BOX VARIANTS**
 1. Hangtab, No Rev-A, Round SOQ
 2. No Hangtab, No Rev-A, Round SOQ
 3. Rev-A, Round SOQ
 4. Rev-A, Oval SOQ TM
 5. Rev-A, Oval SOQ R
- 4 BOX TYPE**
 1. Hangtab - Die cut cardboard hangtab used on first generation NES boxes as a way for retailers to display games on peg hooks. This design proved insufficient to carry the weight of the box contents and lead to torn boxes and product theft. (10/1985-9/1987)
 2. No Hangtab - NES box die was altered to remove the cardboard hangtab cutout in favor of shrink wrap and a glued on plastic hangtab (9/1987-12/1994)

As mentioned during the foreword at the beginning of this feature, the visual guide is supposed to be just that -- a guide. Perhaps the holes that exist may one day be discovered and filled, possibly even by you the reader. As we receive submissions at Wata, we document what is received against this method of tracking variants. Being able to receive something new and undocumented, and to subsequently share it with the community, is the most exciting aspect of certification during this early era of collecting. It enables us to paint a clearer picture and elevate the collecting hobby. We encourage you to check through your collections and see where your games fall, as you may have something you never truly realized was the first variant or an unconfirmed variant. Sharing this research with the community is paramount to completing the research itself. We will find more when we combine efforts, so get out there and see what you can find today!

[See Attached Excel Spreadsheet -- Guide to All Confirmed Black Box Variants](#)

1. October 1985: NES Test Markets

Box Variant: Matte Sticker Seal, Hangtab, No NES-GP, No Code, No NES TM, No Rev-A, Round SOQ

FRONT



Present: Matte Sticker Seal
Round SOQ



Not Present: NES TM
"REV-A"

BACK



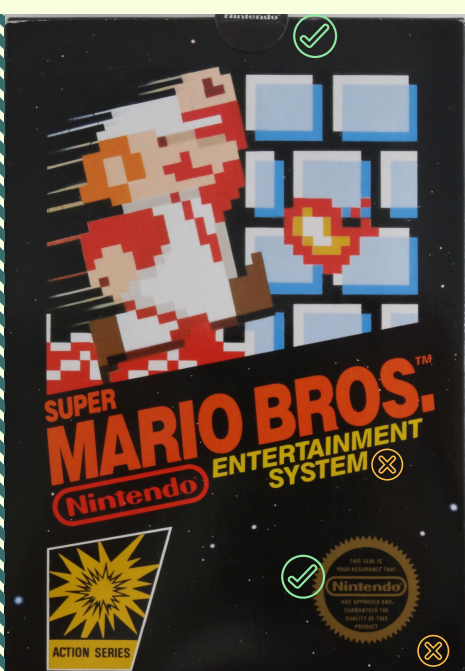
Present: Hangtab



Not Present: Code
"NES-GP"

*1st print for 1985 Black Box releases

HANGTAB, NO REV-A, ROUND SOQ



2. Early 1986

Box Variant: Gloss Sticker Seal, Hangtab, No NES-GP, No Code, No NES TM, No Rev-A, Round SOQ

FRONT



Present: Gloss Sticker Seal

(Changed from Matte Sticker)

*1st print for 1986 Black Box releases

HANGTAB, NO REV-A, ROUND SOQ



3. Mid 1986

Box Variant: Hangtab, No NES-GP, No Code, No NES TM, No Rev-A, Round SOQ

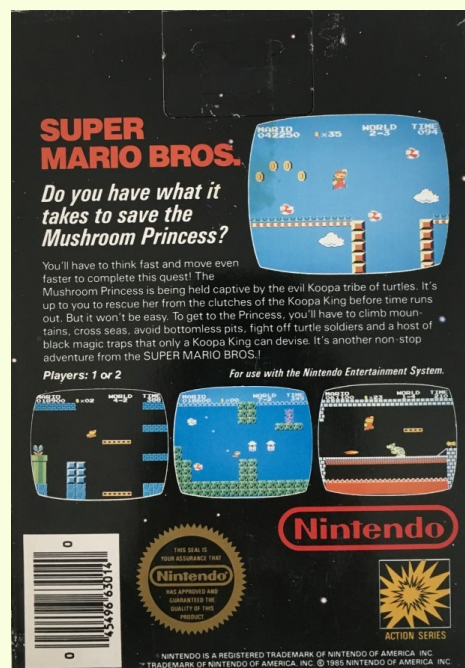
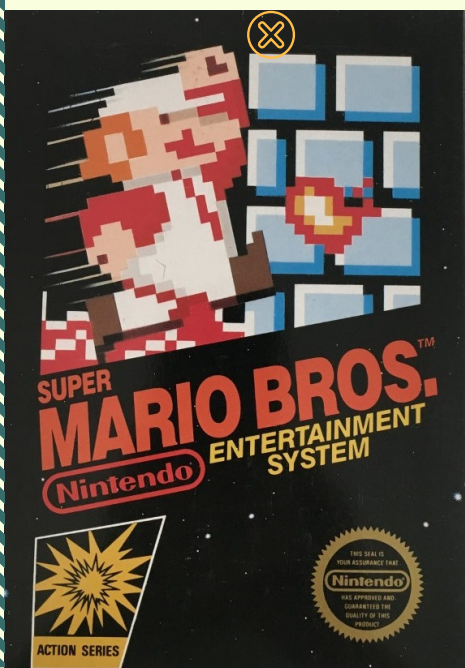
FRONT



Not Present: Sticker Seal

(Changed to shrink wrap)

HANGTAB, NO REV-A, ROUND SOQ



4. Late 1986

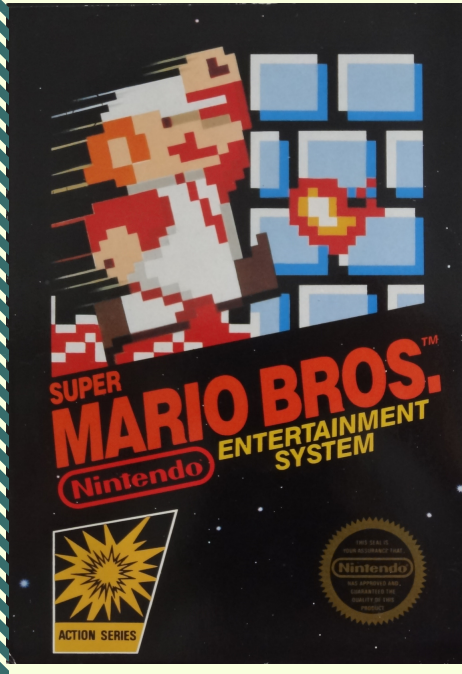
Box Variant: Hangtab, NES-GP, No Code, No NES TM, No Rev-A, Round SOQ

BACK



Present: NES-GP
("Game Pak (NES GP)" added to back)

HANGTAB, NO REV-A, ROUND SOQ



5. Early 1987

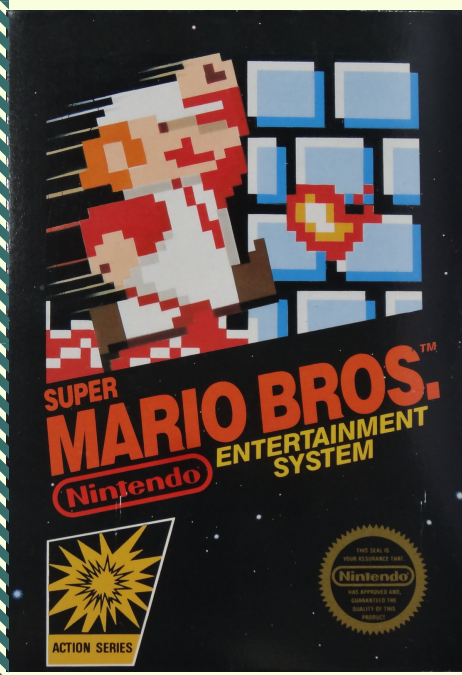
Box Variant: Hangtab, NES-GP, Code, No NES TM, No Rev-A, Round SOQ

BACK



Present: Code
(Game specific code "NES P SM" added to back)

HANGTAB, NO REV-A, ROUND SOQ



*1st print for 1987 Black Box releases

6. Mid 1987

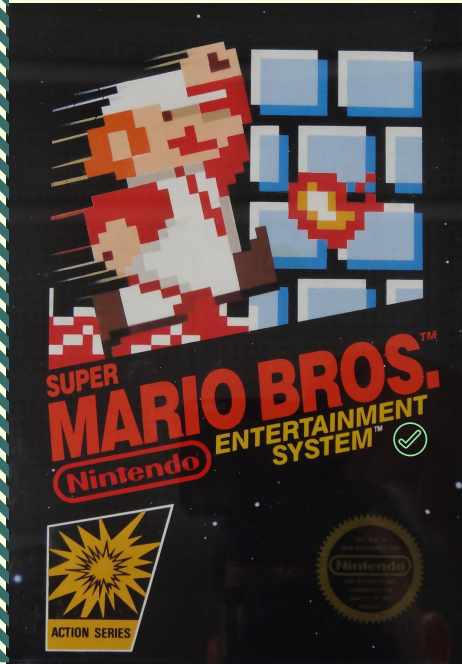
Box Variant: Hangtab, NES-GP, Code, NES TM, No Rev-A, Round SOQ

FRONT



Present: NES TM
("TM" added next to "Nintendo Entertainment System" (NES) on front)

HANGTAB, NO REV-A, ROUND SOQ



7. Sept 1987-Dec 1987

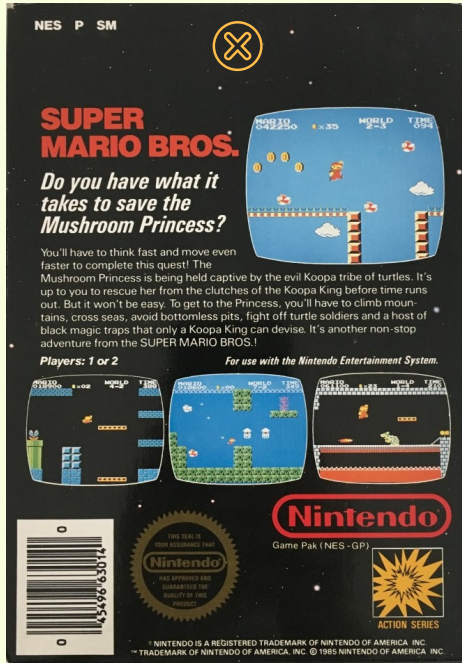
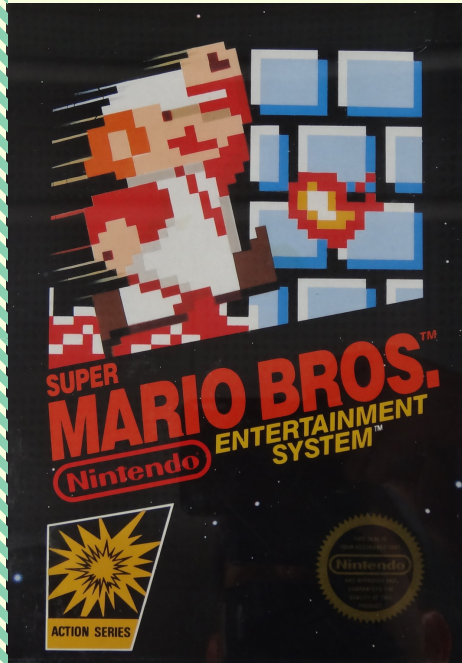
Box Variant: NES-GP, Code, No Rev-A, Round SOQ



Not Present: Hangtab

(Die-cut hangtab permanently removed from NES boxes)

NO HANGTAB, NO REV-A, ROUND SOQ



8. Jan 1988-Mar 1989

Box Variant: Rev-A, Round SOQ



Present: Rev-A

("Rev-A" permanently added next to NES box SOQs to denote the new 3 screw cartridge design)

NO HANGTAB, REV-A, ROUND SOQ



9. Mar 1989-Apr 1990

Box Variant: Rev-A, Oval SOQ TM



Present: Oval SOQ with TM

(Changed from Circle SOQ)

NO HANGTAB, REV-A, OVAL SOQ TM



10. Mar 1990-Dec 1994

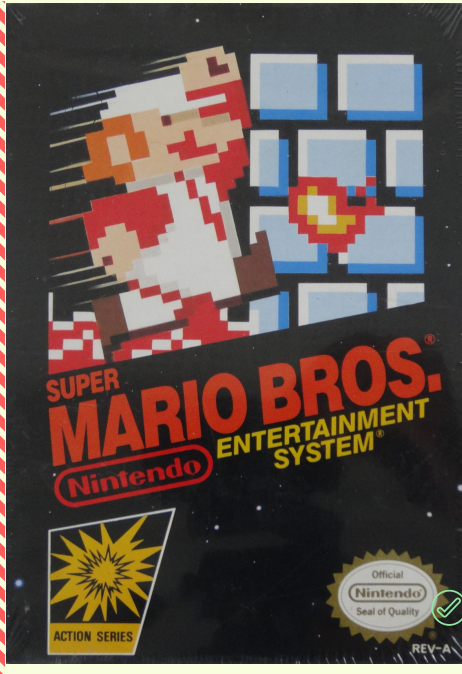
Box Variant: Rev-A, Oval SOQ R

FRONT



Present: Oval SOQ with ®
(Changed from Oval SOQ TM)

NO HANGTAB, REV-A, OVAL SOQ R



11. Mar 1990-Dec 1994

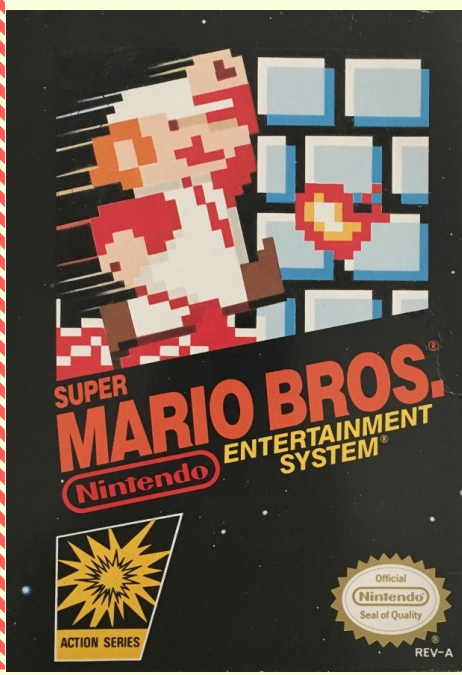
Box Variant: Rev-A, Oval SOQ R,
Promotional Copy (USA*)

FLAP



Present: Star
(Star added below code on inner box flaps -- only visible on non-sealed boxes)

NO HANGTAB, REV-A, OVAL SOQ R



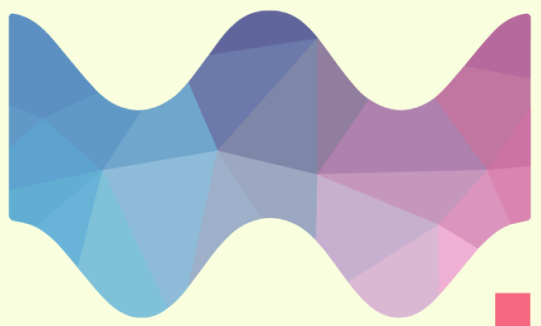
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Happy Collecting!



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