

Chapter 1

How the Wii Came to Be

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If you're like a lot of new Wii owners, you probably don't know much about your new purchase or the story behind it. Sure, you may have heard a snippet on the local news about how the system was almost impossible to find after its initial release in late 2006. You even may have read a newspaper story about how the system is catching on with all sorts of unlikely groups of new gamers.

These factoids are just a part of the story behind the Wii. This chapter covers the hundred-plus year history of Nintendo leading up to the launch of the Wii and beyond.

Nintendo's early years

Nintendo wasn't always the electronic-entertainment powerhouse it is today. The company was originally founded in 1889 as a producer of traditional handmade Japanese playing cards called *hanafuda*. The name "Nintendo" roughly translates to "Leave luck to heaven." Company founder Fusajiro Yamauchi had plenty of luck when the Yakuza (the Japanese mafia) took a liking to Nintendo's cards for their illegal gambling halls. This interest helped the company expand to American-style playing cards by 1907, and build a wide-ranging distribution network of Japanese retailers by 1927. In 1947, Nintendo opened a three-story factory next door to the

simple, one-room office that had once served as its headquarters.

By the 1950s, control of Nintendo had transferred to Hiroshi Yamauchi, Fusajiro's grandson. He expanded the company's card business by introducing plastic-coated cards in 1953 and, in 1959, signed on with Walt Disney Co. to sell cards printed with popular Disney characters. The new Disney-branded cards took the Japanese playing-card market out of the illegal gambling dens and expanded it to the family home. Nintendo sold a record 600,000 packs of cards of the year the Disney printings were introduced.

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Despite this continued success, Yamauchi wasn't satisfied managing a playing-card company. In the 1960s, Nintendo experimented with marketing and selling a variety of different products, eventually expanding into the toy business. Plastic toys like the Ultra Hand (an extendable grabber), the Ultra Machine (an indoor ping-pong-ball-pitching machine), and the Ultra Scope (a toy periscope) were marketed heavily on TV, and sold through Nintendo's already established network of retailers.

Nintendo jumped to electronic toys in the early '70s with the Nintendo Beam Gun, a light-

emitting rifle that activated small, light-sensitive cells which caused a set of plastic barrels to explode. Nintendo used this same essential technology to convert a series of abandoned bowling alleys into virtual skeet-shooting ranges. When these light-gun ranges fell out of style, Nintendo headed back to the home market, selling a licensed version of a Magnavox-made, *Pong*-style game in Japan in 1977. Nintendo had finally entered the video-game business.

This chapter also gives you some advice on hunting down your very own Wii (or helping a friend hunt down a Wii, if you already own one).

I learned much of the history in the sidebars in this chapter from David Sheff's excellent book *Game Over: How Nintendo Zapped an American Industry, Captured Your Dollars and Enslaved Your Children* (published by Random House). Check it out for a much more thorough account of Nintendo's early history.

Wii Development and Unveiling

Even while releasing the GameCube system in 2001, Nintendo was already beginning the planning for its follow-up system, then codenamed Revolution. From the outset, Nintendo wanted the Revolution to take the video game market in a new direction. Instead of trying to make a system with the most powerful technology or the most realistic graphics, Nintendo was going to attempt to change the fundamental way people played games. "The consensus was that power isn't everything for a console," said legendary Nintendo game designer Shigeru Miyamoto, the man behind *Donkey Kong* and *Super Mario Bros.*, in a 2007 interview with *BusinessWeek*. "Too many powerful consoles can't coexist. It's like having only ferocious dinosaurs. They might fight and hasten their own extinction."

Nintendo president Satoru Iwata confirmed this new direction for the company when he announced the existence of the Revolution project to the world at a 2004 press conference. "Today's consoles already offer fairly realistic expressions, so simply beefing up the graphics will not let most of us see a difference," he said. "The definition for a new machine must be different. I want you to know that Nintendo is working on our next system and that system will create a gaming revolution. Internal development is underway."

The rise and fall of a video-game giant

In 1981, Nintendo caught the crest of the huge arcade-gaming wave with *Donkey Kong*. The game was notable for its basic story (told through animated cut scenes), run-and-jump gameplay, and one of the first identifiable human characters in a game (who would eventually be known as Mario the plumber). The game sold hundreds of thousands of units to arcades in Japan and the United States. Nintendo had further success with a few follow-up arcade games, and with a popular line of miniature, handheld games known as *Game* and *Watch*.

This early success in the arcade game market was all a drop in the bucket, though, compared to the overwhelming reaction to Nintendo's Family Computer, or Famicom. First released in Japan in 1983, the home system became a hit—thanks, in part, to *Super Mario Bros.*, one of the first action games to feature a smooth-scrolling background. Nintendo brought the Famicom to the United States in 1985 as the Nintendo Entertainment System (NES). The American market was initially wary of the Japanese-made system, but the system slowly built up momentum and eventually took over 90 percent of the American video-game market. By the early '90s, there was a NES in nearly one in three American households. The name "Nintendo" was synonymous with "video games."

Nintendo followed up the phenomenal success of the NES with the even more phenomenal success of the Game Boy in 1989. One of the first portable systems to support interchangeable games stored on plastic cartridges, the Game

Boy fended off competition from more powerful portables thanks to a lower price, longer battery life, and exclusive rights to the addictive puzzle game *Tetris*. The Game Boy line sold over a hundred million units worldwide over the next two decades.

Nintendo's success on the home-gaming front was not as consistent. After achieving market dominance with the NES, Nintendo was slow to react when Sega's more powerful Genesis system started to find some success in the early '90s. By the time the new Super Nintendo Entertainment System was released, Sega had enough of a foothold to gain control of nearly half the home gaming market.

In the mid-90s, Nintendo's market position eroded further in the face of the Sony PlayStation, whose compact-disc-based games made similar games on the new Nintendo 64 system look like relics from long ago. By the dawn of the new millennium, Nintendo's GameCube and Microsoft's new Xbox system were fighting over the market scraps left behind by Sony's PlayStation 2, which was becoming nearly as dominant in the marketplace then as the NES had been almost 20 years prior. Two decades after the NES launched in America, "PlayStation" was now synonymous with "video games" to an entire generation of players. Nintendo needed something big to turn its market position around. That "something big" turned out to be the Wii.

Among avid gamers, rumors started flying about what, exactly, Nintendo had planned for its mysterious Revolution. Some speculated that the system would include a controller with a built-in touch screen, similar to the company's recently released Nintendo DS handheld. Others thought the controller might include a built-in microphone for voice-controlled gaming, or a modular design with specialized, snap-off sections. There were a few gamers who even envisioned fanciful concepts for three-dimensional virtual reality

helmets or projection systems that transformed the entire living room into a magical play space.

It wasn't until the Tokyo Game Show in September 2005 that Nintendo finally halted the speculation by revealing a prototype of its unique new remote controller. Selected members of the gaming press got to try out the controller on a series of specially designed demos that showed off the Remote's ability to sense the movement of the player's hand. Initial reactions among the press were cautiously optimistic. A writer at 1UP.com said the Remote initially made his arms and hands tired, "but once I sat down and relaxed, resting my hands on my legs as I would with a normal controller, everything clicked." A writer from gaming website IGN said it was "easy to imagine why Nintendo is so heavily invested in the idea. There is such great potential to do so many unique things."

This initial enthusiasm turned to confusion, though, when Nintendo revealed the final name for its new system in early May 2006. From then on, what had been known as Project Revolution would officially be known as the Wii. Nintendo explained the new name in a press release, saying in part that, "Wii sounds like 'we,' which emphasizes that the console is for everyone. Wii can easily be remembered by people around the world, no matter what language they speak. No confusion. No need to abbreviate. Just Wii."

The press wasn't so understanding. Journalists, developers and gamers around the world made fun of the system's name with less-than-wholesome homonyms. Some in the industry thought it was a joke, intended to get some free press from the marketing world. A few gamers even tried to boycott the name, continuing to call the system Revolution long after that name was officially dead. Over time, though, the initial shock seems to have worn off, and today most gamers can talk about their Nintendo Wii with a completely straight face.

By the end of May 2006, Nintendo was ready to let a wider audience of industry insiders try out the Wii for the first time at the Electronic Entertainment Expo, an annual game industry trade show. Crowds flocked to Nintendo's booth throughout the three-day event, snaking around the Los Angeles Convention Center and waiting up to four hours to get into the small demonstration area. The long wait was worth it, to be among the first gamers anywhere to try demos of games like *Wii Sports*, *Super Mario Galaxy*, and *The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess*.

On September 14, 2006, Nintendo finally revealed that the Wii would launch in the United States just two months later, on November 19, at a price of \$250. This put the system's launch just two days after that of Sony's PlayStation 3, the \$500-to-\$600 follow-up to the then-dominant PlayStation 2. Both new systems also had to contend with Microsoft's Xbox 360, which had launched to

great fanfare nearly a year before. The Wii was heavily outclassed in terms of processing power and the support of many prominent game developers.

When November 19 finally came around, eager Nintendo fans lined up outside their favorite gaming stores to be the first to own the long-awaited system. The entire stock was sold out within hours, and new shipments were hard to come by for the remainder of 2006 — meaning gamers who didn't plan ahead missed out on the holiday season. Early reviewers were generally impressed with the Wii's unique controller and its prospects of getting game players off the couch, but some were underwhelmed by the system's decidedly last-generation graphics and (initially) thin library of games. Some predicted the system would be a flash in the pan — a gimmicky impulse buy that would get a lot of attention initially before being relegated to the back of America's collective closet.

As the months went by, though, this proved not to be the case. While the Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3 eventually recovered from the holiday rush and became widely available at retailers nationwide, stocks of the Nintendo Wii remained sparse well into 2007. A combination of a lower price and a growing public fascination with the system's unique controller led to shortages across the country. Some suspected Nintendo of purposely creating a false shortage, but consumers were simply buying up everything Nintendo's revamped production line could produce — the system routinely outsold the competition month after month. The problem only got worse as the 2007 holiday season came around and the Wii was still hard to come by. To this day, potential Wii owners have to be a little bit lucky to find a Wii on the shelves (see the next section).

Game publishers that had been wary of Nintendo in years past flocked to the successful Wii, increasing the system's game library to over 200 games as of this writing. Nintendo continued development as well, releasing new games and Channels, as well as innovative new controllers such as the Balance Board that comes with *Wii Fit*. In early 2008, Nintendo surpassed the ten-million-unit threshold in worldwide sales. In the summer of 2008, Nintendo overcame Microsoft's year-long head start to become the best-selling system in North America. Upcoming peripherals like Wii MotionPlus and games like *Wii Music* seem set to continue Nintendo's now successful video game revolution.

Finding a Wii

If you're reading this book, you probably already have a Wii. Even so, you may have a friend, or a neighbor, or a jealous cousin who just can't seem to find the system in his or her local store. Take pity on your fellow gamers by

sharing these handy tips for finding the extremely hard-to-find Wii out in the retail wild:

- ✔ **Visit your local stores constantly:** Most game and electronics stores don't know when exactly their next shipment of Wiis will come in; the inventory of new systems tends to disappear within hours (or even minutes) after they arrive. This means that finding a Wii in stock at your local store is largely a matter of luck. You can increase your chances by stopping by frequently to ask about the store's inventory.

You can also call local stores to ask about inventory, but be warned: By the time you get in the car and drive to the store, the systems might be out of stock yet again. . . .
- ✔ **Keep an eye on Sundays:** While there's no precise schedule to when stores receive their shipments of Wiis, some stores stockpile systems and make them available on Sundays, to coincide with newspaper circulars. It couldn't hurt to make yet another trip out first thing Sunday morning.
- ✔ **Use the Web:** Sites like www.WiiTracker.com and www.NowInStock.net/wii keep track of Wii availability at a variety of online stores. These sites aren't 100-percent reliable, but they're a good way to find out which Web sites might have a Wii to sell you at any given moment.
- ✔ **Buy a bundle:** With the Wii shortage still in full swing, many online and brick-and-mortar retailers only sell Wiis in bundles, together with various games and accessories. These bundles may have some items you don't necessarily want, and they cost more than a system by itself. That said, bundles tend to remain in stock much longer than unadorned systems, so you'll probably have better luck finding one.
- ✔ **Use eBay:** New Wii systems are generally plentiful on this popular auction site. The only catch: You usually have to pay a slight premium over the suggested retail price of \$250 to compete with your fellow potential buyers. See *eBay For Dummies*, 5th Edition, by Marsha Collier (Wiley Publishing, Inc.) for more on finding good deals in online auctions.
- ✔ **Recruit family:** When my sister wanted a Wii, she recruited me to climb out of bed early on a frigid Sunday morning in January to scope out my local stores. She ended up finding a system before I actually had to leave the house, but her theory was sound — increase your chances by increasing the number of searchers.