# Nintendo and a New Standard for Video Games: Crash Course Games #7

Crash Course: Games
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Hi, I'm Andre Meadows and this is Crash Course Games. Today we're gonna talk about the second half of the 1980s, when the video game industry was reborn, largely due to the influence of Nintendo.

Now, after the great North American video game crash in 1983, which was called "The Atari Shock" in Japan, the video game console industry in the United States was crushed! Odyssey, ColecoVision, Intellivision and others left the marketplace. Atari was sold off. The U.S. home console and cartridge market, which was worth nearly 3 billion dollars in 1982, fell to 100 million dollars in 1985, according to Nintendo of America. And those numbers aren't adjusted for inflation! The number of console games produced also dropped dramatically.

But at the same time, the home computer market was growing, and video games for the Commodore 64 and Apple II looked like the future of gaming So much, in fact, that *Video Games Player* magazine changed their name to *Computer Games.* Traitors!

But the video game crash that we talked about last time, happening in the United States, didn't happen in Japan. And Nintendo, which started as a playing card company, would bring video gaming back. How did they start? And what changed everything in the mid-80s? Well, grab a hold of your plumber's hat, your Triforce, and don't get turned into an eggplant - cause we're gonna find out!

(Intro)

Nintendo was founded in 1889 (Now, that's old-school!) by a young Fusajiro Yamauchi, to distribute his handmade playing cards. For eight decades, Nintendo made cards and toys. And the company still produces a line of playing cards today, but mostly as a tribute to its past. Nintendo broke into the video game market in the 1970s, when they won the rights to distribute the original Magnavox Odyssey console in Japan. They developed a string of arcade hits with *Donkey Kong*, *Ice Climbers*, and *Mario Brothers*, and then turned to handheld games. The "Game & Watch" handhelds were one of their first hardware products, and they were extremely popular; they're the reason you have that little 2D silhouetted Mr. Game & Watch in your *Smash Brothers* games.

Nintendo's experience in licensing the Odyssey, plus its success with the Game & Watch handheld, led the company to develop a new game console for the Japanese market, which had been relatively untouched in the crash. Let's go to the Thought Bubble!

Nintendo's new console debuted in Japan as the brightly colored, red-and-white Famicom or "Family Computer Home Gaming Console". It sold more than 2.5 million copies by 1985, which led Nintendo to consider the North American market. In 1985, the company introduced the Nintendo Entertainment System, or "NES".

They were so wary of backlash from the crash and competition from the home computer markets, that they removed all mentions of video games. To distance the product from the recent industry crash, they invented a whole new vocabulary. Consoles were called "Control Decks", and game cartridges were called "Game Packs". The system was colored gray, so it looked like a serious computing device. It loaded games from the front, like a VCR, and not top-down like previous consoles. They sold the device in toy stores rather than electronic stores, and made no-risk deals with American retailers.

The system had a pretty sweet futuristic light gun, known as the "NES Zapper", (Take that, *Duck Hunt*!) and R.O.B., the "Robotic Operating Buddy", who seemed cool but only played two games. It was really the consumer response, they made the NES succeed. Nintendo's surveys of people who bought the system in the New York City Area in 1985 indicated that more than 90% of those who bought the NES would recommend it to friends and family.

One year after the NES debuted, Nintendo sold over 1.8 million units. By 1989, Nintendo had a 75-80% share of the 3.4 billion dollar U.S. video game market. It was clear that the U.S. gaming industry had returned, and Nintendo was Player One. Thanks, Thought Bubble!

Nintendo's real success, though, was its ability to create a culture around itself and its games. The first thing they did was to ensure they wouldn't make the mistakes of the past. Atari suffered because they didn't monitor third-party developers, some of which made terrible, rushed games that flooded the market. That's one of the reasons why we had the crash. So Nintendo tightly controlled the games that appeared on its system with the official Seal of Quality.

These golden seals told players that they held a quality product. Nintendo wouldn't let third party developers make NES games unless they agreed to a contract to make games only for Nintendo for two years and to only make five games a year for the system. These were seen as quality controls. They enforced this with a special computer chip called the "10NES" that controlled what games would work on the system. Though, later, developers got around them. This allowed for quality games that created loyalty in the fanbase. Players trusted that Nintendo games would be fun, look great and would actually work... with some exceptions... LJN.

Nintendo also encouraged the loyalty of its customers by creating the *Nintendo Fun Club*, which sent users a newsletter with gameplay tips and news about popular and upcoming games. The newsletter was a success, with subscriptions nearing 600,000 by the end of 1987. They replaced this newsletter with *Nintendo Power* magazine in 1988. In *Nintendo Power*, you could write letters to the editor, enter contests, get exclusive merch and comics, get advice from gameplay counsellors. This helped create a special Nintendo community for players to exist.

And the crucial element of Nintendo's success was the quality of its games. Advanced technology allowed for more detailed graphics and sound, and longer and more complex games. Games like *Super Mario Brothers*, *Legend of Zelda*, *Kid Icarus* and *Metroid* captivated players and gave them hours of gameplay. Characters like Q*bert and Pac-Man were cute, but they didn't have a lot of back story. Mario and Luigi, from *Super Mario Brothers*, were plumbers running around the Mushroom Kingdom trying to save Princess Peach, or Princess Toadstool back then, from Bowser, King of the Koopas.

Okay, it's not like it's *Les Misérables* or anything, but it was something for players to get attached to and connect with. And audiences definitely connected with the game. *Super Mario Brothers* has sold over 40 million copies since its release.

Now, while the Super Mario Brothers were hopping around the Mushroom Kingdom, *The Legend of Zelda* opened the world of Hyrule to players. The game had varied environments, like forests, deserts and dungeons, that unfolded in every direction. Now, while Mario constantly moved from left to right in his race to save the princess from the evil beast, Bowser, players could move Link in any direction on his quest to save Princess Zelda from the evil beast Ganon. Nintendo had a thing for saving princesses from evil beasts.

This sense of exploring a giant video game world was also new to players. In *The Legend of Zelda* the audience was in charge of the pace of play. They could go where they wanted and take as much time as they wanted in the land of Hyrule. In *Metroid*, Samus explored the open-ended planet of Zebes, with an entire ecosystem

of Metroids and other aliens to fight. This complex game had multiple endings, and areas that were only accessible after players found certain power-ups.

And speaking of *Metroid*, we're gonna play a little bit right now. So, watch out, Mother Brain! It's time to level up! Ooooh! Listen to that eerie music! Whooo! That was what was interesting about *Metroid*: unlike some of the other NES games, *Metroid* had this dark, eerie feel and the music played a large part in that. All right, I'm gonna jump right into this.

But which way do I go?! (Laughs) So you could go left, you could go right, up, down. Because they were open-world, you had these giant maps as part of the game. And that's why *Nintendo Power* was such a big deal, because you could get secret information from *Nintendo Power*, that you couldn't find anywhere else, on how to play some of these games. Aaah! (Laughs) Back off, man, back off! No! (Laughter)

Now I'm just casually playing through the game but what's interesting about games like *Metroid* is that people have played them so many times and know the maps so well that they've actually started doing "Speed Runs", where they'll just try to get through it as fast as possible. And the reason why you even had speed runners, or just people being able to find every single secret in the game, is because you had this nice home experience of playing these games. And another reason that *Metroid* had replayability was because it had five different endings. And what was very fascinating about some of those endings was that it revealed something that we all know now but didn't know back then: That Samus is female! She gets to join the ranks with Ms. Pac-Man.

So, that's *Metroid*. I guess Mother Brain is gonna live another day 'cause we're gonna move on but it's definitely fun to revisit this game. *Metroid*, *Super Mario Brothers*, *Duck Hunt*, *Kid Icarus*, *The Legend of Zelda,* Nintendo brought gaming back with excitement. And *Excitebike*! And a level of commitment to quality that brought the video game industry back from the brink. Nintendo's games showcased improvements in underlining game technology, but they also reflected a maturing industry. With these new tools, game designers created immersive worlds and empowered players as never before. To borrow Nintendo's trademark advertising slogan: "Now you're playing with power!"

But Nintendo won't be alone in the video game race for long, thanks to another company with a little blue hedgehog. We'll see you next time!

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