

GOOD NINTENTIONS

30 YEARS OF
THE NINTENDO
ENTERTAINMENT
SYSTEM

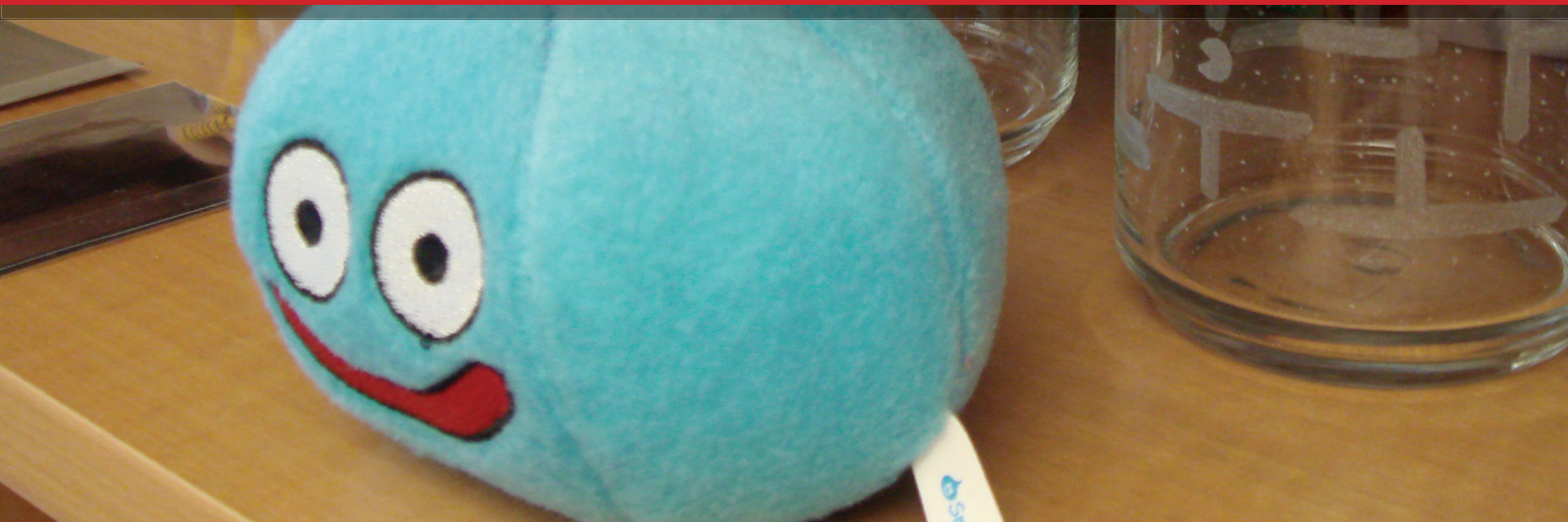
Previously published as GameSpite Quarterly 5

Revised and expanded edition

Not endorsed by Nintendo of America

SECTION ONE: 1983-85

The prehistory of NES



In 1986, a Federated Group outlet opened in my town. For those who don't remember, Federated was an early attempt at creating a "big box" electronics retail superstore. The chain didn't last long, I don't think, but it paved the way for more successful ventures like Best Buy (and less successful ones, like Circuit City).

Enduring or not, the store certainly seemed amazing at the time, a massive warehouse-sized space, huge and roomy, but simultaneously elegant. All manner of electronics were given their own spacious display areas, be they stereos, appliances, or computers. Sleek new CD players were set up proudly, proclaiming the future of music on tiny silver discs. The management aimed to make this a self-fulfilling prophecy by giving away vinyl albums to customers, not-so-subtly indicating that the old-school LP was worth little more than a door prize. This was fine by me, since my father scored a free Mr. Mister record for me in a raffle.

On the other side of the building, shoppers could choose from a wide array of microcomputer software, from Apple II to IBM PC. The lion's share of the computer space, however, was given over to the new Amiga platform. Shoppers were confronted with a brilliant Amiga demo display that demonstrated the machine's jaw-dropping graphical prowess, flanked by a host of employees eager to tell you that, yes! This computer absolutely was worth the bafflingly huge price tag. Its high-resolution, full-color video demo made a pretty good argument on its own when you saw the sad amber-screened Kaypros and monochromatic Macs on the other aisles.

Still, my awe at the Amiga lasted only until I pried

my eyes away and drifted a couple of rows over, where some brilliant soul had set up a NES display unit to let browsers try their hand at Irem's *Kung-Fu*. The Amiga had impressed me in an abstract, hopeless sort of way, filling me with the same sensation one experiences when they meet a celebrity they admire and realize that they are, in fact, less than an insect to that person. The Amiga was powerful, but it didn't care about me.

Not so the NES. I could tell that the NES wanted to get to know me. It wanted me to take it home and spend quality time with it. It was a year and a half before I was able to save up enough cash to claim an NES of my own, but eventually I did. And like millions of other American kids, the NES defined gaming for me.

This book is not about the Famicom, or about how badly Nintendo neglected Europe back then. It's about the collective experience that American NES fans shared all across the country, our mutual memories of afternoons spent in front of a small grey box that quietly reinvented games. We've grown older through the years, and the hardware has been supplanted many times over, but the torch we carry for the NES still burns bright.

I originally published *Good Nintentions* in August of 2010 to mark the NES's 25th anniversary. Now, five years later, as the system turns 30, I've revisited the book for a top-to-bottom overaul, with dozens of new game write-ups and heavy additions to existing text with the goal of making this an up-to-date overview of the system. It's still not comprehensive, but there's only so much you can do in 260 pages.

—Jeremy Parish, July 1, 2015

NINTENDO FAMILIAR

The Older Sibling from Japan



Without the Famicom, there would have been no NES.

“Well, obviously,” you sneer. “The two systems were the same thing, so of course one couldn’t have existed without the other. It’s elementary existentialism, smart guy.” And fair enough. Perhaps it would be more interesting to say that without the *success* of the Famicom, there would have been no NES. Nintendo launched its system in Japan in the summer of 1983, where it faced direct competition from a number of other console gaming hopefuls. Within days of the Famicom’s debut, Sega launched the SG-1000, and the MSX computing standard was unveiled. While the NES arguably edged out its competitors very slightly in terms of power, the trio arrived on equal footing.

Yet for reasons only Japan will ever properly understand, it was Nintendo’s system that ended up dominating the market, and third-party publishers with the perspicacity to back the Famicom enjoyed stunningly brisk sales. Clumsy, obtusely-designed games like *Milon’s Secret Castle* and *Tower of Druaga* became million-sellers revered by a generation of Japanese nerds, simply because they were on the right platform at the right time.

The Famicom had been initiated by direct order from company president Hiroshi Yamauchi, who presumably saw the home market as a potentially more stable venue for selling games than the volatile arcade. Designed under the direction of Masayuki Uemura of Nintendo’s R&D2 division, the Famicom was perfectly in keeping with the company’s charter for hardware design, a perfect balance of capability and affordability. The console was profitable for Nintendo from the moment it debuted, yet its components made it competitive with more expensive

systems. The Famicom hit Japan less than a year after the ColecoVision debuted in the U.S., yet there was little question which system was more powerful. Even the console’s earliest games, largely first-party arcade ports, were crisper and faster than their counterparts on Coleco.

The Famicom’s swift rise to heaven made it the *de facto* game platform for Japanese publishers. While MSX retained fairly healthy support, developers poured more creativity and ambition into their Famicom software. The console’s array of practical add-ons—most notably the Famicom Disk System and the various Memory Mapper Chip sets—kept it viable throughout the ’80s even as more robust competition such as the Sega Mark III (better known as the Master System) and the NEC PC Engine (known as the TurboGrafx-16 in the U.S.) provided programmers with new avenues for their work.

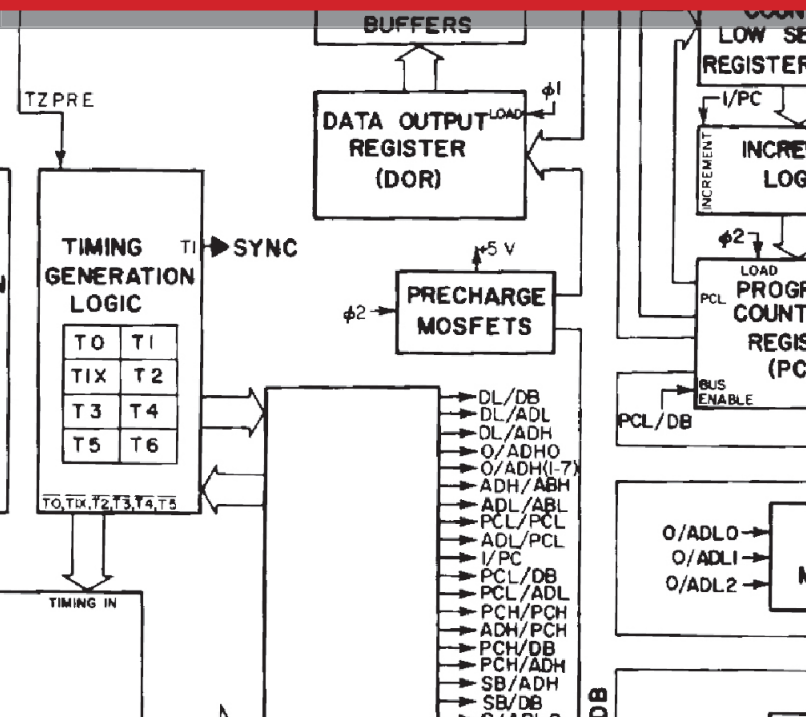
The timing, popularity, and endurance of the Famicom created a vast fan culture around the system, one which survives to this day. The Famicom was the console that fully introduced the concept of home gaming to Japanese audiences, and as a result it holds the same place in the nation’s collective memory as both the Atari VCS and the NES do in the U.S.

Combined with the fact that the Famicom saw twice as many official releases as the NES—more than 1400 versus about 750—and that, unlike their American peers, Japanese audiences didn’t have to wait a year or more for games to be localized, it’s easy to understand that even though the two systems are inextricably linked, the Famicom’s legacy is even more deeply ingrained than the NES’s.



6502

The mother brain | Ricoh | Processor | 1983



Nintendo has always been about maximizing profits without sacrificing too much quality, and that corporate philosophy was clearly already in place when designer Masayuki Uemura created the Famicom hardware in the early '80s. At the system's heart was a modified variant of the MOS 6502 chip, which offered performance comparable to the Zilog Z80 seen in competing systems yet cost far less. The system was basically a ColecoVision clone in some respects, though its differences helped define it.

NCL president Hiroshi Yamauchi insisted the Famicom be powerful yet affordable, and the 6502 made that possible. The chip became an industry standard, which meant that it's well-documented... a big help for hackers and amateur programmers who continue to keep the NES home fires burning even today.

CONTROLLER II MICROPHONE

For original rock stars | Nintendo | Built-in peripheral | 1983

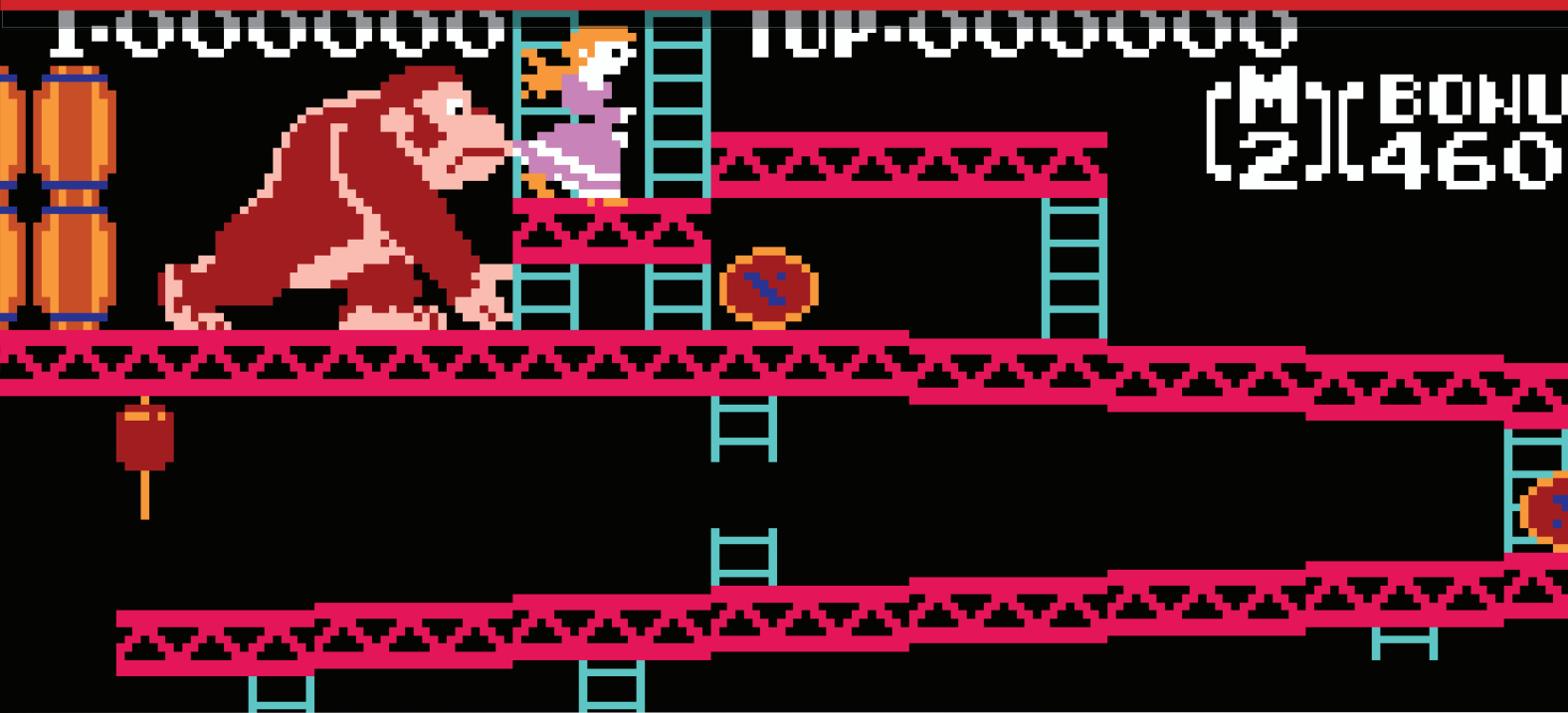
One of the interesting quirks of the Famicom is that its controllers were hard-wired into the console, with remarkably short cords befitting compact Japanese living rooms. Also interesting: The second controller had a microphone built in. This was almost completely useless, since few games made use of the feature and the vast majority of the ones that did were really terrible (*Takeshi No Chousenjou*, for example).

The sole notable exception was *The Legend of Zelda*, which let players destroy Pops Voice monsters by shouting. Lacking the microphone due to the NES's detachable cords, the U.S. version of the game was modified to make Pops Voice vulnerable to arrows.... which left American players slower to catch on when the creatures showed up again in *Phantom Hourglass*, where they could be destroyed by shouting into the DS mike.



DONKEY KONG

Famicom's killer ape | Nintendo | Arcade | July 1983 (JP) June 1986 (US)



The NES version of the arcade classic seems to be the one Nintendo likes to sell us over and over again, which is pretty annoying. Sure, this was the best-looking home version of *Donkey Kong*, but it's still missing a level. No big deal, right? Except the original was just a four-level game. Any algebra teacher can tell you that 25% is a pretty sizable cut. And you should listen to algebra teachers about *Donkey Kong*, because they're mostly fat, mustachioed men who look a lot like Mario. So they would know.

All joking aside, despite the missing level and

squashed screen proportions, it was still the killer app for Famicom at launch in 1983 — the closest thing to a perfect conversion of the arcade hit available in any market on any platform. And it should have been! This was Nintendo's breakout arcade hit, and the Famicom hardware basically existed in order to replicate *Donkey Kong*. Even then, it required a remarkable amount of fakery and some hard compromises — not just the factory level, but also the engaging little cut scenes that bookended the simple little story the action told.

