



VIDEO GAMES

# Nintendo, Once Down, Devises Its Comeback

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Published: May 26, 2007

SEATTLE, May 23 — Reggie Fils-Aime, president and chief operating officer of Nintendo of America, is certainly the game industry's man of the moment, at least in the United States. Mr. Fils-Aime and his crew staged a day of media events here this week amid one of the most remarkable turnabouts in fortune gamers have seen since Atari went belly up two decades ago.

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Nintendo

Nintendo is promoting mind-exercise games like Brain Age 2.

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Nintendo

Nintendo's Big Brain Academy features logic and memory games.

After placing a distant third in the last generation's console wars, behind the PlayStation 2 and Microsoft's original Xbox, Nintendo has roared back to a position approaching dominance on the strength of its two innovative machines: the hand-held Nintendo DS and the much-lauded Wii. Last month, Nintendo sold more than four times as many Wii units (360,000) as Sony sold PlayStation 3's (82,000), and many people still can't find the Wii on store shelves.

"We have about 25 people call or stop in asking about the Wii every day," the clerk at an EB Games retail store here said on Tuesday night. "When we get a few units they just disappear. It's almost like people are camped out waiting."

Meanwhile, the DS portable continues to outsell Sony's PlayStation Portable (though a recent price cut on the PSP may tighten that race) and, somewhat under the mainstream radar, the Pokémon franchise continues to rule national sales charts. The latest versions of Pokémon, called

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Diamond and Pearl, sold more than 1.7 million units for the DS in a week after their introduction last month.

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Given how close Nintendo appeared to perpetual marginalization just a year ago, one can forgive Mr. Fils-Aime the spring in his step.

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“Only twice has one company simultaneously had the No. 1 new hardware console, the No. 1 portable console, the No. 1-selling game and been the No. 1 overall software publisher,” he said in an interview here. “The first time was Nintendo in the ’80s. The second time is Nintendo now.” His ebullience was a far cry from the subdued tone at Sony’s comparable media event last week in San Diego. There, Sony fought gamely, if uphill, against the widespread perception that its new PlayStation 3 has generally been a disappointment.

Nintendo is riding so high that it did not even feel the need to demonstrate its “Big Three” games expected for the Wii later this year — Super Mario Galaxy, Metroid Prime 3: Corruption and a new version of Super Smash Brothers. Instead, the company focused largely on new versions of mind-exercise franchises like Brain Age and Big Brain Academy and on diversions for children like Take-Two’s forthcoming Carnival Games collection.

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That choice was an almost perfect reflection of what has made Nintendo so successful recently.

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For sure, the new Mario, Metroid and Smash Brothers games will all become best sellers. But they will do so largely by appealing to what is generally considered the “traditional” video game demographic — hard-core male players between the ages of 16 and 40. Nintendo would never neglect that audience.

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But the key to Nintendo’s recent revival has been not in going back to the same well of players the industry has been drawing on for decades, but in expanding the market and appealing to everyone else. And it turns out there are a lot more of everyone else than there are of the stereotypical young male player.

Games like Nintendogs for the DS have pulled in girls and women, while the Wii’s easy-to-use style (you just wave the controller around) has made it a must-have in households that would never consider buying an Xbox 360 or PlayStation 3. The Wii’s graphics and the little Mii characters that users create with it are not the world’s snazziest, and they are certainly not rendered in high definition, but Mr. Fils-Aime may have a point when he contends that the latest pixel-shader technology, for example, just isn’t that important to most everyday players.

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“Both of our competitors have focused on an old paradigm,” he said. “They focused on more technological horsepower as the path to success. They fell into a trap of just listening

to their core user base rather than focusing on attracting new customers.”

So have Sony and Microsoft overshot the mark with their focus on creating high-definition gaming and making their machines into futuristic digital media hubs?

“I definitely think they have,” he said. “Look, it seems like every household has that one techie who can figure out how to connect the DVD player to the TV and the PC to all the other devices in the home and so on. But everyone else in the home just wants to turn the thing on and have it work. And I think the consumer electronics industry needs to recognize that. That’s what Apple got so right with the iPod. There were plenty of MP3 players out there, but Apple came along with a product you could just pick up and play. And that’s what we think we got right with the Wii.”

So now Nintendo is aiming higher and bigger. Mr. Fils-Aime and his boss, Satoru Iwata, Nintendo’s chief executive, want to continue to position gaming as a competitor for mainstream entertainment dollars and eyeballs.

“We don’t consider just Sony and Microsoft our main competitors,” Mr. Fils-Aime said. “If people decide to stay home on a Saturday night playing Wii bowling instead of going to the movies, we win. If people spend 22 minutes making their perfect Mii instead of watching a sitcom, we win.”


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