

# Nintendo – Strategic Management Japanese Style

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**Abstract—In January 2014 the management of Nintendo released the results of the financial year 2013. The company's recent results could be compared to playing a video game over and over again, putting in enormous effort and soul, only to experience a major defeat after all. The forecasted profit of 55 billion yen was not reached, and was replaced instead by a loss of around 25 billion yen due to poor sales of the latest console, the Wii-U.**

**Keywords—Nintendo, Japan, Strategy, Crisis**

In 1983 Nintendo started to develop its own videogame console, and introduced it to the Japanese market soon after, in 1984. The “FamiCom”, as this platform was called, had a 16-bit processor, 52 colors, a price of around US\$100 per unit and only a few titles.<sup>1</sup> In its first 12 months it received great feedback from Japanese customers and brought more money to Nintendo than Yamauchi would ever have expected. Therefore, it was not surprising that Nintendo intended to market and sell the FamiCom in America and Europe too. In those years Nintendo created the third generation of video game consoles, the previous generations having been characteristically early stage developments.

At the same time, the industry was declining. Fewer and fewer people were interested in buying video games. At the beginning Nintendo wanted to team up with Atari, at that stage a strong competitor in the market. Yamauchi wanted to give the rights to distribute Nintendo games in the United States to its rival. Just before the contract could be signed the management of Atari discovered a Donkey Kong-like character from another company and suspected Nintendo of making deals with other firms. Based on that incident the deal between Nintendo and Atari never happened.<sup>2</sup> We can only speculate how the video game industry would look if Atari had never discovered the Donkey Kong copy.

In the end Nintendo decided to go it alone. In order to convince retailers to buy the FamiCom during this time of declining sales they promised that, if the retailer was unable to sell any of the consoles, Nintendo was willing to take them back. Giving this security Nintendo did its first test marketing in New York with 100,000 units using Super Mario. It took everyone by surprise when they sold out very quickly.<sup>3</sup> After the final release of the FamiCom in the

United States, Nintendo had several competitive advantages over rivals such as Atari.

Firstly, the FamiCom (or Nintendo Entertainment System, as it was called outside Japan) was sold for half of the price of other consoles.<sup>4</sup> One reason for this was a deal with the chip producer Ricoh who delivered the necessary chips for a very low price, as Nintendo had promised to buy at least 3 million of them.<sup>5</sup> Secondly, Nintendo developed an official seal of quality in order to head off the scenario which happened from 1983, when many third-party publishers released cheap and low-quality games. Now Nintendo was able to control those developers and restrict the number of games to just a few titles at the beginning.<sup>6</sup>

Nintendo was now able to out-sell its competitors by 10:1<sup>7</sup> and gain an overall market share of 90%.<sup>8</sup> Today the FamiCom itself has been sold over 50 million times and its software has sold over 350 million units.<sup>9</sup> The production of this console was stopped in 2003, because some parts were not produced by the manufacturer anymore.<sup>10</sup> The success of the FamiCom lasted through the late 1980s and into the 1990s when Nintendo published a new console, the Super FamiCom. According to Nintendo's figures, 4.1 million American homes bought consoles in 1987. Out of this number Nintendo sold around 3 million, while its competitors Atari and Sega shared the rest.<sup>11</sup> By entering a crashed market with new strategies and a competitive platform Nintendo was able to resurrect the video game industry in the United States.

1989 was an extraordinary year; Nintendo announced the release of the successor to the FamiCom: the Super Nintendo Entertainment System (as it was called outside of Japan) or

<sup>4</sup> opt. cit.

<sup>5</sup> “Nintendo Famicom/NES”, *Ciberiadc*, accessed November 14, 2013, [http://www.cyberiadpc.com/vgg/nintendo\\_nes.htm](http://www.cyberiadpc.com/vgg/nintendo_nes.htm).

<sup>6</sup> MariachiMacabre, “Nintendo Seal of Quality”, *Giantbomb*, accessed November 14, 2013, <http://www.giantbomb.com/nintendo-seal-of-quality/3015-3052/>.

<sup>7</sup> “Nintendo Entertainment System/Famicom: Console Information”, *Consoledatabase*, accessed November 14, 2013, <http://www.consoledatabase.com/consoleinfo/nintendo/>.

<sup>8</sup> “Nintendo Famicom/NES”, *Ciberiadc*, accessed November 14, 2013, [http://www.cyberiadpc.com/vgg/nintendo\\_nes.htm](http://www.cyberiadpc.com/vgg/nintendo_nes.htm).

<sup>9</sup> opt. cit.

<sup>10</sup> “Family Computer: 1983 to 2003”, *Famicom World*, accessed November 16, 2013, <http://famicomworld.com/system/>.

<sup>11</sup> “The Famicom rules the world!-(1983 -89)”, *The Achieve*, accessed November 14, 2013, <http://web.archive.org/web/20100101161115/http://nintendoland.com/history/hist3.htm>.

<sup>1</sup> “Nintendo Entertainment System/Famicom: Console Information”, *Consoledatabase*, accessed November 14, 2013, <http://www.consoledatabase.com/consoleinfo/nintendo/>.

<sup>2</sup> opt. cit.

<sup>3</sup> opt. cit.

simply the Super FamiCom. On top of all this success Nintendo understood how to go beyond the limit: in 1983 a movie called "The Wizard" was played in American cinemas. In that movie a gaming competition was held and at the end people saw that the actor was playing a new and unknown Super Mario Game. People around the country got excited about this new game, and when Nintendo released Super Mario Brothers 3 the response was overwhelming. Therefore, it is not surprising that this game later became the best-selling game of all time (18 million copies). When the president of Apple was asked who was the biggest threat for the company at that time he had only one answer: Nintendo.<sup>12</sup>

#### **The 4<sup>th</sup> Generation: Sega does what Nintendon't – Really!?**

Besides Nintendo's most valuable product at that time, the company did not tire of producing more devices for the growing market. Being as innovative as before, the new idea to enchant gamers was a smaller portable handheld console called the Game Boy. Nintendo released the Game Boy together with the game Tetris, which they had discovered in Russia.<sup>13</sup> Around the same time competitor Atari developed a similar console, which was actually able to display colors, for US\$180. However, Nintendo's product was again much cheaper than other products and many people decided to purchase a Game Boy instead of similar products.<sup>14</sup> Over the years several advanced versions of the Game Boy were introduced by Nintendo, such as the Game Boy Color in 1998 and the Game Boy Advanced in 2001. One of the most interesting features was the Game Boy's "backwards compatibility". Through this technology consumers were able to play games which were launched for the original Game Boy on the more advanced versions of this hand-held device. For future consoles and competitors this technology became increasingly important.

Despite the success of Nintendo, its competitor Sega became more aggressive in regard to its products. Before entering the video game market Sega – like Nintendo – was also involved in the arcade business and decided to launch its own home console, the Sega Master System, a few years after Nintendo introduced the NES to the market. The overall success of the Master System was moderate. While this console was popular in Europe, people in North America mostly saw it as a "poor man's console" since Nintendo dominated 90% of the market.<sup>15</sup> In the late 1980s, however, Sega introduced the Sega Genesis/Sega Mega Drive (USA/Europe) to the Japanese, US, and European markets. At this point it was

obvious to everyone that there was a console war between Nintendo and Sega, battling for the favor of gamers around the world. In order to gain a higher market share Sega launched a massive marketing campaign which was sometimes directly against Nintendo. In particular the Sega Genesis was presented as "cooler" and better than everything Nintendo had to offer, and slogans such as "The Genesis does what Nintendon't"<sup>16</sup> were used to support the new and fresh image of Sega.

This fierce battle was not only fought between the consoles themselves, but also between the mascots and main character of each company. From 1991, when Sega introduced Sonic the Hedgehog, the main topic for children in every schoolyard was probably: Who is better – Mario or Sonic? 1990 was also the year that Nintendo introduced the successor to the Super Nintendo Entertainment System (SNES), or Super FamiCom as it was called in Japan.

Now it was on: Nintendo vs. Sega, the SNES vs. the Sega Genesis, Mario vs. Sonic, and the winner takes all: the crown of the 4<sup>th</sup> generation of home videogame consoles. The bare numbers suggested that Nintendo was winning this battle by millions. Super Mario World for the SNES sold 20 million copies, while Sonic the Hedgehog was bought 15 million times.<sup>17</sup> As Table 3 illustrates, Nintendo's console was also more successful than Sega's product at that time and sold 20 million units more.

It may appear that this battle was clearly won, but a war in the gaming industry is never over. Indeed, the numbers show that Nintendo sold more in the 16-bit area, but by comparing this to the 3<sup>rd</sup> generation of consoles one can see that Nintendo's advantage was shrinking. Moreover, Nintendo teamed up with Sony in order to develop a console which was able to play CDs (which was already a feature of the Sega Genesis). For various reasons, however, Nintendo changed their partner to Philips and not long after Sony intended to introduce its own game console to the market.<sup>18</sup>

#### **The 5th Generation: When the King Was Losing His Crown**

The new generation of consoles saw proof that the canceled deal with Sony had had a hand in the destiny of Nintendo. The company did not realize it needed to produce a new console which was able to read games from a CD. Instead Nintendo was still betting on the old technology of cartridges, while its competitors Sega and Sony released their own models which were able to read CDs, which were less

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> David S. Cohen, "History of the Sega Genesis – Dawn of the 16-bit Era", *About.com*, accessed November 16, 2013, <http://classicgames.about.com/od/consoleandhandheldgames/p/History-Of-The-Sega-Genesis-Dawn-Of-The-16-Bit-Era.htm>.

<sup>16</sup> Steven L. Kent, "The Ultimate History of Video Games: The Story Behind the Craze that Touched our Lives and Changed the World", *Prima Publishing*, Roseville, California, 2001, p. 405.

<sup>17</sup> "The Nintendo Years", *Edge-Online*, accessed November 16, 2013, <http://www.edge-online.com/features/nintendo-years/2/>.

<sup>18</sup> Jake Swearingen, "Great Entrepreneurs in Business History", *Moneywatch*, accessed November 16, 2013, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/great-intrapreneurs-in-business-history/>.

expensive to produce. Moreover, some third-party developers suspected Nintendo of using the old technology to make money by licensing. The result was that some software producers shifted away from Nintendo and decided to release their games on the new Sony PlayStation. Despite this major difference, what all three consoles had in common was that they were capable of displaying three dimensional (3D) graphics, which was a huge development at that time, even though the Nintendo 64 was released two years after the PlayStation and the Sega Saturn.

### The 6<sup>th</sup> Generation: Has The Bottom Been Reached?

In 1998 it was time for the 6<sup>th</sup> round of the console war, when Sega once more released a new console, the Sega Dreamcast. The following years were marked by a battle between four companies fighting for the crown in the game industry and for the hearts of gamers around the world. Besides Sega there were also Sony, Nintendo, and the new rival Microsoft. In regard to Sega it is worth mentioning that in 2001 it became the next company to surrender and retreat from the hardware market after Atari.<sup>19</sup> In the same year the company announced that from now on it would focus on developing software. More interestingly, Sonic, the character battling Mario and Nintendo for over a decade, became a “friendly rival” and appeared in several games for later Nintendo consoles. The company even announced a worldwide partnership with Mario and Nintendo in 2013.<sup>20</sup> Nintendo’s new invention after the N64 was called the GameCube, a purple-colored box/dice which was finally able to read CDs. Nintendo, still afraid of piracy and copying, decided to develop CDs which were slightly smaller than the regular size. This again was actually a disadvantage for Nintendo, because playing CDs and DVDs was an advantage of the other consoles which could then also be used as home entertainment devices. It was not surprising that after the success of the PlayStation, the successor was even more successful. At the end of this generation the PlayStation 2 became the bestselling console of all time with over 150 million units sold.<sup>21</sup>

But the newbie did well too: the Microsoft Xbox sold over 20 million units, a similar number to the Game Cube. The overall problem for Nintendo from that point was that it was

standing apart from Sony and Microsoft. While these two companies were aiming to gain the respect of hardcore gamers and young adults, Nintendo focused on the younger generation and families. While Nintendo had gained a significant share of this target group fifteen years before, it now had to step back and leave the field to its rivals because its brand image did not allow the company to change the target customers quickly. Despite these new circumstances, Nintendo had at least one advantage over the other consoles: price. While the PlayStation and Xbox cost around US\$300 at the start, the game cube was available for two-thirds of this price, around US\$200. Now, after the medium successes of the previous consoles and emergence of new and strong rivals, Nintendo needed to find its place on the market. Despite its strong brand, Nintendo could be the next to fail after Atari and Sega, which had both been long-term rivals. It needed to turn its disadvantages into advantages.

### The 7<sup>th</sup> Generation: Nintendo’s Revolution

The beginning of the next generation was characterized by an air of mystery created by Nintendo itself. The next generation console was codenamed “revolution” and no one knew what was going to happen.<sup>22</sup> In the end it turned out that the controller to play the game (not the console itself) was the revolution. The design was very simple, white and limited to only a few buttons (after the button explosion over the decades) and it looked like a remote control. After this “revolution” was presented there were many doubts, in particular from third-party publishers, about this new console hitting the market.<sup>23</sup> In particular the fact that the other two competitors were also announcing their next-generation consoles made it hard for Nintendo to convince many critics and software developers. Moreover, when the company announced the name of the new console, “Wii” (emphasizing the intention that people come together and share fun and enjoyment) it fueled the skepticism around the new product. For Nintendo, however, this was not a reason to give in or entertain any thoughts of failure. The company and its managers were standing firm behind the product and were convinced that the Wii would capture and conquer a new segment of the market which was until that time mostly untouched: non-traditional gamers. These gamers mainly comprised children, parents, and of course casual gamers, which were targeted by the competitors to a lesser extent.<sup>24</sup> Another intention of Nintendo was to avoid the new round of

<sup>19</sup> IGN Staff, “Sega Sinks Console Efforts?: Rumors swirl around troubled console. But is Sega’s hardware doom a reality?”, *IGN*, accessed December 03, 2013,

<http://www.ign.com/articles/2001/01/24/sega-sinks-console-efforts>.

<sup>20</sup> “Nintendo announces exclusive partnership with SEGA for upcoming Sonic the Hedgehog games”, *Nintendo Official Website*, accessed October 27, 2013, <http://www.nintendo.co.uk/News/2013/May/Nintendo-announces-exclusive-partnership-with-SEGA-for-upcoming-Sonic-the-Hedgehog-games-757496.html>.

<sup>21</sup> Thomas Freund, “Ab in den Ruhestand: Sony beendet Produktion der PlayStation 2 (Update)”, *NetzWelt GmbH*, accessed December 05, 2013, <http://www.netzwelt.de/news/94781-playstation-2-sony-stellt-produktion-vertrieb-japan.html>.

<sup>22</sup> “Nintendo Revolution Renamed To Nintendo Wii”, *Console Watchers*, accessed December 03, 2013, <http://www.consolewatcher.com/2006/05/nintendo-revolution-renamed-to-nintendo-wii/>.

<sup>23</sup> Walt Wyman, “Iwata on ‘The End of Indifference to Games’”, *Gamespot*, accessed December 7, 2013, <http://www.gamespot.com/articles/iwata-on-the-end-of-indifference-to-games/1100-6157803/>.

<sup>24</sup> Die Welt.de, “Nintendos Wii zu Weihnachten in Europa erhältlich”, *Axel Springer SE*, accessed December 7, 2013, <http://www.welt.de/wirtschaft/webwelt/article153012/Nintendos-Wii-zu-Weihnachten-in-Europa-erhaeltlich.html>.

the console wars and put the focus on interaction and group activity rather than good graphics.

After the release of the competitors' platforms it became clearer and clearer that the Wii was actually going to outsell the other consoles. But not only the number of sold units was a victory for Nintendo, but also the revenue which came from selling it. While Sony and Xbox released their heavy graphic and home entertainment consoles for a comparably high price, the Wii was sold for only half the price, 25,000 yen.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, it was calculated that every sold unit of the PlayStation and Xbox was actually a loss for the two companies (US\$300 per PlayStation<sup>26</sup>; US\$126 per Xbox<sup>27</sup>), which were hoping that the profit would come from the software. Nintendo, however, was able to make a profit of US\$92 for each Wii which was sold. In this regard Table 2 lists the market price for each component in order to calculate approximately the total costs for one Wii.<sup>28</sup>

A proverb says that when two people quarrel, a third rejoices. While Sony and Microsoft were battling each other in graphics and heavy hardware, Nintendo happily took the biggest piece of the cake, because its idea and approach could not be challenged immediately. At the end of the 7<sup>th</sup> generation Nintendo did not look slated to be the next company after Sega to drop out, but instead had managed to gain back its crown in the video game industry, which it had lost over a decade before.

#### Meanwhile on the Handheld Market

When the Game Boy hit the market it became a great success for Nintendo. In the following years the company released a new series of the tried and trusted Game Boy; the Game Boy Pocket (a miniature version of the original) and the Game Boy Color (which could display colors and was backwards compatible). After these small improvements came Nintendo's next generation handheld device, the Game Boy Advance. From now on gamers around the world were able to enjoy better graphics and gameplay due to the improved processor and two additional buttons on its shoulders. Greater success, however, came when Nintendo released a new device which was not simply an improvement of the old

Game Boy. The company called it the Nintendo DS. It came out in 2004 and was succeeded by the Nintendo 3DS. Both handhelds were a big success and could not be challenged by Sony and its own devices, the PlayStation Portable and the PlayStation Vita. Their main disadvantage was that the devices themselves were more expensive and the batteries ran down faster.<sup>29</sup> Figure 2 illustrates that in regard to sold units Nintendo was the clear winner in the handheld market. The Nintendo DS series and the Wii were two of the reasons why the company was able to make a high profit and suddenly all doubts about Nintendo's ideas disappeared.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> "Vergleich PlayStation Portable (PSP) VS Nintendo DS", *Spielkonsole.in*, accessed December 8, 2013, <http://www.spielkonsole.in/vergleich-playstation-portable-bsp-und-nintendo-ds/>.

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