

The People Behind Mario:

When Hiroshi Yamauchi, president of Nintendo Co., Ltd. (NCL), hired a young art student as an apprentice in 1980, he had no idea that he was changing video games forever. That young apprentice was none other than the highly revered Shigeru Miyamoto, the man behind Mario. Miyamoto provided the inspiration for each Mario game Nintendo produces, as he still does today, with the trite exception of the unrelated “Mario-based” games produced by other companies. Just between the years 1985 and 1991, Miyamoto produced eight Mario games that went on to collectively sell 70 million copies. By record industry standards, Miyamoto had gone 70 times platinum in a brief six years. When the Nintendo chairman Gunpei Yokoi was assigned to oversee Miyamoto when he was first hired, Yokoi complained that “he knows nothing about video games” (Game Over 106). It turned out that the young apprentice knew more about video games than Yokoi, or anyone else in the world, ever could. Miyamoto’s Nintendo group, “R&D4,” had the assignment to come up with “the most imaginative video games ever” (Game Over 49), and they did just that. No one disagrees when they hear that “Shigeru is to video gaming what John Lennon is to Music!” (www.nintendoland.com) As soon as Miyamoto and Mario entered the scene, America, Japan, and the rest of the world had become totally engrossed in “Mario Mania.”

Before delving deeply into the character that made Nintendo a success, we must first take a look at Nintendo, and its leader, Hiroshi Yamauchi. Hiroshi Yamauchi ruled Nintendo, and the Japanese and American video game industries, with an iron fist. He led with astonishing commitment and work ethic. David Sheff points out in *Game Over, Press Start to Continue* that “commitment to an idea and pure tenacity are inherent in Japanese business philosophy” (172), which certainly fitted Yamauchi’s case. What he said was law, and his own employees and heads of other companies alike were at his mercy. His leadership style involved intimidation and lacked compromise, and according to one Nintendo manager “he is so certain that he is right that he listens to no one” (Game Over 39). A rival company executive claimed: “We *all* were intimidated. Like a God, Yamauchi wielded power” (Game over 71). Even though Yamauchi had never played a video game in his life, his sixth sense enabled the best decisions in the industry. While others laughed at the name: “Donkey Kong,” he persisted in selling it. *Donkey Kong (1981, Arcade)* later went on to save Nintendo of America and fuel the success of its parent Japanese company, Nintendo Co., Ltd. His decisions were risky, and still are today, yet Yamauchi always comes out on top. Only a few Nintendo products, out of hundreds, have flopped, namely the “Virtual Boy,” which only sold 50,000 in Japan out of an expected 3 million, “Radarscope,” whose old consoles were cleverly converted into auspicious *Donkey Kong* consoles, and other minor cases. Yamauchi has been described as “either remarkably intuitive or terrifically lucky.” (Game Over 39) He pitted engineers against each other so they would compete and create a better product, and rarely congratulated his workers, thus elevating the worth of his compliments. As one Nintendo engineer put it: “We lived for his praise” (Game Over 23). Sheff continues to note that “a nod from Yamauchi could make a day—or week, or month. Engineers were ecstatic when they came up with an idea that delighted him” (Game Over 39). If Miyamoto and the game designers were the blood of early Nintendo, Yamauchi was undoubtedly their heart.

While Hiroshi Yamauchi had his firm grip on the Japanese home video game market, Minoru Arakawa was trying to reach the American market. Arakawa started out in a Manhattan office with one assistant who was the first employee of Nintendo of America (NOA): his wife Yoko. Developing NOA consisted of high stress, low rent living for the Arakawas, as they contacted retailers by hand to get their product out. Nintendo's first challenge was to enter the 8 billion dollar coin-op business, which was ruled by Atari and others. They attempted to do this with a game called "Radarscope," a shooting game that was highly hyped, yet resembled too much the hackneyed concept of the "shoot 'em up" to sell well. When the savior *Donkey Kong* arrived from Japan, Arakawa and his warehouse team had little to say, and less to hope. Yet they still converted the old *Radarscope* (1980) consoles into *Donkey Kong* machines. After the immense profits fueled by *Donkey Kong*, Yamauchi and Arakawa wanted to go after the American home video game market, which at the time was totally in shambles after the fall of Atari. Yet every retailer Arakawa tried to sell games to gave him the same response. As David Sheff points out, "the last thing anybody wanted to hear about was a new video game system. Everywhere [Arakawa] went, he heard one name over and over again: Atari" (130). Despite extreme discouragement by American retailers, along with industry experts and failed control group tests, Yamauchi believed in his company. The persistence of the two men pulled through, and he gave Arakawa an investment of 50 million dollars backed by NCL. Entering the American home video game market wasn't made easy by this investment, though. Arakawa and his small staff of marketers, Ron Judy and Bruce Lowry, headed to toy stores to get the Nintendo Entertainment System, and most importantly Mario, on the shelves. Part of the demand for Mario amongst retailers was created by contacting industry analysts and displaying NCL's stunning financial figures. Peter Main, Nintendo's Marketing head and 1989 *Adweek* Marketer of the year, remarked that "it became a self-fulfilling prophecy that something would happen" (Game Over 172). After many sleepless nights of setting up game displays and begging manufacturers, Mario, with the help of Arakawa, had moved to the U.S.

Mario's history consists of a list of some 70 games, many of them being "Mario-based" games, where the game play is dissimilar to that of a Mario game yet Mario is used as an icon. These "non side-scrolling," but still quite profitable games include: *Super Mario Kart* (1992, SNES), *Mario Kart 64* (1996, N64), and *Mario Golf* (1999, N64). Mario also made several novelty appearances in games where the game play is not only different from a Mario game, but where the gamer doesn't even play Mario. A few of these games are: *Mike Tyson's Punch Out* (1984, NES), *Pinball* (1985, NES), *Tetris* (1989, Game Boy), and strangely enough, *Zelda 3* (1991, SNES) (yes, he is pictured on the wall of a building). The complete listing of Mario games that are responsible for the birth of a game genre, and the resurrection of the U.S. home video game market is as follows: *Donkey Kong*, *Donkey Kong, Jr.* (1982, Arcade), *Mario Bros.* (1983, Arcade), *Super Mario Bros.* (1985, NES), *Super Mario Bros. 2* (1988, NES), *Super Mario Land* (1989, Game Boy), *Super Mario Bros. 3* (1990, NES), *Super Mario World* (1990, SNES), *Super Mario Land 2* (1992, Game Boy), *Super Mario World 2: Yoshi's Island* (1995, SNES), and *Super Mario 64* (1996, N64). The soon to be released *Super Mario 128* (2001, Game Cube) will undoubtedly add to this impressive list of hit games.

Mario was, and still is, a success not only because of the gameplay and storyline of games in the Mario series, but because of the hardworking people behind them.

Mario's success was the result of a unique combination of inspiration and perspiration by the efforts of great men and women.

The Story of Mario:

The ubiquitously loved Mario made his world debut in non other than a game about a particularly asinine ape named Donkey Kong. *Donkey Kong* was originally an arcade game, where a pudgy mustachioed carpenter (later to become a plumber) attempted to rescue his Brooklyn girlfriend named Pauline from what Miyamoto described as an ape that is menacing, but "not too evil or repulsive" (Game Over 47). "Donkey" is a Japanese translation of "stupid and goofy," and Miyamoto borrowed "Kong" from King Kong. The plot of *Donkey Kong* was simple, and it established a successful paradigm for the future Mario storylines: Mario's arch-nemesis (Donkey Kong in the early games, but King Bowser Koopa in *Super Mario Bros.* and beyond) kidnaps a female friend of Mario's (Pauline in *Donkey Kong*, Princess Daisy in *Super Mario Land*, and Princess Toadstool in every other Mario platform game), and Mario must defeat levels of enemies complete with mini-bosses in order to save her. Even though Mario was an extremely pervasive icon in American culture, his name was stumbled upon almost randomly. Minoru Arakawa named the amiable plumber after Mario Segali, the Italian landlord of the first Nintendo of America warehouse who threatened to evict the Japanese company if it didn't pay its rent.

Mario's physical appearance reveals much about both Miyamoto's philosophy and the aim of the Mario series. Surprisingly, technological limitations also had much to do with Mario's physique. The overall concept of Mario was to be "a funny, hang loose king of guy" (Game Over 47), shown by his abnormally large nose and eyes. Miyamoto also described his vision of Mario as "goofy and awkward" (Game Over 48). Even though he was born in Japan, Mario was set apart from the anime-styled characters of Japanese animation, where the characters have streamlined bodies and elaborate hairstyles. Miyamoto wanted to ensure that the common man could relate to Mario, so he made him a blue-collar worker and burdened him with an oversized gut. Mario wears overalls because it was easier to animate his hands, and pixel¹ limitations endowed him with a mustache instead of a mouth. Miyamoto gave Mario a hat because again, pixel limitations prevented the animation of hair and as Miyamoto himself said: "I cannot come up with hairstyles so good" (Game Over 48). The result was a character that consumers can relate to, someone friendly and humorous, who defeats his enemies in the most clean and chivalrous manner.

Since gamers lived, and still live, vicariously through Mario, it was naturally appropriate to give Mario family and friends. The widely famous Luigi was introduced in *Mario Bros.* as his younger brother and sidekick, and has appeared in a total of twenty four Mario titles. Luigi is slightly taller, yet assumes a lesser role than Mario. If two are playing, Luigi is always the second player. Both Mario and his brother inherited the Mario family surname, making their full names Mario Mario, and Luigi Mario. Arguably, Mario's most important sidekick was none other than the lovable and capable Yoshi. Yoshi made his first appearance in *Super Mario World* for the SNES. He greatly expanded Mario's capabilities, because Mario could never die when he was riding Yoshi,

¹ Tiny bits of color that make up an image on a monitor.

providing that he can jump back on Yoshi after being knocked off. Yoshi could also eat things Mario couldn't even touch; such as plants, spiny beetles, and most astonishingly, fire. Toad is another lovable character Miyamoto created. His Mushroom hat and modest wardrobe suggests friendliness. In *Super Mario Bros. 3*, Toad assists Mario by giving him power-ups, and in *Super Mario Bros. 2* playing him is the best way to pass the "digging" levels. Finally, we are brought to Mario's principle motivation, his female companions. Pauline, Mario's girlfriend from his hometown of Brooklyn and first female companion, appeared in *Donkey Kong* and *Pinball*, but never again. Princess Peach Toadstool comes next, and has appeared in every other Mario scrolling game except for those produced for the Game Boy. She has appeared in seventeen Mario games, and is one of the series' most recognizable characters. The Game Boy games, *Super Mario Land* and *Super Mario Land 2* presented different goals for Mario. These games portrayed the search for Princess Daisy of Sarasaland. She has appeared in only these games and *Mario Tennis (2000, N64)*.

Mario games haven't always allowed just Mario to have all of the fun. In Mario games where other players could be played, the characters, namely Mario and Luigi (in the main Mario titles), Yoshi (in *Super Mario Worlds 1 and 2* and others), Toad and Princess Toadstool (in *Super Mario Bros. 2* and both Mario Kart games), and Bowser, Donkey Kong, and Koopa (in both Mario Kart Games and others), embodied different characteristics of their game play, thus rendering some better than others for certain gamers and levels. This added the important dynamic of choice to the Mario series, enabling the gamer to pursue different personalities. In the western version of *Super Mario Bros. 2*, Luigi could jump higher, and the Princess could float. These differences weren't planned because of the different platform which the game was based upon. Since Nintendo thought that the Japanese *Super Mario Bros. 2 (1986, Famicom)* was too much like *Super Mario Bros.* for the American market, they created a western *Super Mario Bros. 2* based on a slightly different platform game. In the original game, *Dream Factory: Doki Doki Panic*, the characters were "Arabian heroes dressed in Turbans" (nintendoland.com). These characters embodied different capabilities, and with the same programming structure, the Mario characters did as well. This set the trend for other Mario games such as the Mario Kart series. In *Super Mario Kart* and *Mario Kart 64*, characters were endowed with different strengths. Yoshi and Princess Toadstool accelerated the fastest, Bowser and Donkey Kong Jr. had the fastest top speed, Toad and Koopa maneuvered the best, and the Mario brothers had all around skill. *Super Mario Kart*, with its variance of character control, continued to be "the most sold SNES game ever" (www.nintendoland.com). (This isn't counting *Super Mario World*, because SMW came standard with the SNES). Strategy has always been present in the Mario realm, but the characters' differing skills has taken it to the next level.

Though Mario would be incomplete without his friends, equally important are his enemies. *Donkey Kong* proved not menacing enough to be a true enemy of Mario, so Shigeru Miyamoto's vision was entrusted in King Bowser Koopa, who made his debut in *Super Mario Bros.* King Bowser Koopa, commonly referred to as Bowser, appears in twenty two Mario games, and was waiting for Mario at the end of each. He always resides in a castle complete with fiery pits and shooting flames aimed at torching careless plumbers. But even with this nefarious element, Bowser, like all Mario enemies, remains lovable. His cartoon-like look presents opposition, but not to the point of excessive

intimidation. In the main Mario games, his children, Larry, Iggy, Lemmy, Wendy, Ludwig Von, Morton Jr., and Roy Koopa, each guard a level.

The story of Mario presented, and still presents, a tangible goal that can be feasibly reached by all gamers. Saving the princess is much more desirable than merely eating dots and attaining a high score, as in a game like Pac-Man. Mario's friends and enemies helped to define Mario, and together in their cartoon-like world, they contributed to form a story that kids could relate to. The Mario revolution, however, has not passed, and the significant advancements in game play that Mario prompted are timeless.

Mario Engenders Significant Developments in Game Design:

The type of story surrounding Mario, one of a likeable character defeating enemies in cartoon-like ways, was one of the main reasons why the game was a success, and why it impacted the industry so greatly. Miyamoto remarked to a Nintendo executive that “the shoot-‘em-up and tennis-like games that were in the arcades at that time were unimaginative, simply uninteresting to many people” (Game Over 47). Miyamoto's ultimate vision was to create interactive cartoons, and through Mario, he did just that. This concept was devoured by kids, because it was at the time unprecedented in the video game industry. A 1990 study revealed that “Mario was more noticeable than Mickey Mouse” (Game Over 9). Kids still loved Disney, they just couldn't play Mickey Mouse themselves. The original Mario games were responsible for the inception of a genre that still persists today. Mario had such an impact on the video game industry that Sega created a character, Sonic the Hedgehog, to specifically compete with the Mario brothers. Furthermore, the current “Mario-like” games—where fun-loving characters safely defeat their enemies in non-gory, cartoon-like ways—include modern hits such as *Banjo-Kazooie*, *Crash Bandicoot*, and *Pokémon*, to name a few. Contrasted with the earliest video games, and their linear genre of banal “shoot ‘em ups” and space or tank games with no storyline, the ubiquitous nature of the cartoon in modern video games shows the incredible impact Mario has had. Instead of watching cartoons on TV, kids could play them interactively. The Mario story even allowed adults to recollect their childhoods. Miyamoto states: “It is a trigger to again become primitive, primal, as a way of thinking and remembering” (Game Over 51). Mario was the first of any video game to personify the spoils of victory, as seen in Pauline and the Princesses Peach Toadstool and Daisy. Instead of just getting to “the next level,” and chasing some endless concept until the game ends forcibly by speeding up significantly, kids had a tangible goal to work towards. This goal gave players a sense of accomplishment that was unprecedented in the video game industry.

Mario revolutionized the world of computer gaming from not only the stated conceptual standpoints, but from technological standpoints as well. “Arakawa felt it was vital that the Nintendo system be distinguishable from its predecessors” (Game Over 159). This was true in both of the mentioned ways. Mario ushered the age of the scrolling platform game, where Mario runs through worlds sideways. To accomplish this, Nintendo engineers made the best use out of the existing technology they could, also implementing a central processing unit (CPU) and a picture processing unit (PPU).

Super Mario 64 is arguably the first of quality 3D video games, setting the benchmark for other companies to follow. Other games in the Mario genre, including *Crash Bandicoot* and *Sonic the Hedgehog* have recently gone 3D as well, following suit

behind Mario. Many argue that *Super Mario 64* is “the greatest video game of all time” (www.nintendo.com). It revolutionized the way Mario, and “scrolling games,” were played, allowing him to break out of his 2D world and explore new dimensions. *Super Mario 64* also brought Mario into the realm of the problem-solving game, where it wasn’t just about jumping on koopas, the enemies in the past Mario games, but rather exploring the world like Link from the *Zelda* games, and finding the hiding coins. There still are plenty of koopas to trounce on, but that isn’t the game focus.

By accomplishing all of these innovative feats, Mario not only invented a genre of video games, but went on to shape that genre. He has paved the way for both this massive and profitable genre of video games, and the video game industries of Japan, America, and other countries.

Mario: Technology, Culture, and Business:

Nintendo Co. Ltd and Nintendo of America’s success is due largely to the Mario games that sold their systems. Mario reflected the cultural needs of the time, when kids strived to become the characters they watched on TV. Mario gave them a chance to do this, and the stock markets of Japan and America proved this.

David Sheff points out that “Hiroshi Yamauchi had a complete lock on Japan’s multi-billion dollar video game industry” (Game Over 72). By the mid eighties, NCL was thriving, literally controlling over 90% of the Japanese video game industry (Game Over 171). The 1989 *Japan Economic Journal* heralded Nintendo as the number one company in Japan, based on stock performance, earnings per employee, and overall profits. David Sheff notes that “by 1991 Nintendo had supplanted Toyota as Japan’s most successful company, based on the indices of growth potential, profitability, penetration of foreign and domestic markets, and stock performance. Nintendo made more for its shareholders and paid higher dividends between 1988 and 1992 than almost any other company traded on the Tokyo Stock Exchange” (5). Yamauchi had transformed the Japanese video game business, and he and Miyamoto did the same with that of the U.S.

The early and mid-eighties in America existed without a home video game industry. Due to the fall of Atari, where management complications and lack of innovation led to its demise, the words “video game” had become taboo in toy stores. NOA reacted to this cultural block by naming their systems “Control Decks,” and their games “Game Paks.” The Nintendo advertising campaign consisted of expensive commercials (up to 5 million per commercial (Game Over 188)) and sports stars endorsing their products at local malls. Nintendo soon snowballed into a natural cultural phenomenon. Nintendo even teamed up with Pepsi to get its name out, and even convinced Universal Films to produce a movie, really a 100 minute commercial, named *The Wizard*, that they would charge kids to see in theatres. American children were dying to snag the latest *Nintendo Power* magazine and join the Nintendo Fun Club. These advertising efforts paid off, as the Japanese company had immersed itself into American culture.

After long and hard efforts to get the NES on shelves, NOA started to reap the benefits of their hard work. In its first fiscal year (1986), Nintendo sold 1 million systems, and the second year (1987) yielded 3 million. In 1988, 7 million systems were sold, along with 33 million cartridges. *The Legend of Zelda (1988, NES)* and *Mike*

Tyson's Punch Out (1988, NES) sold 2 million a piece (*Super Mario Bros.* came standard with each system). The *Super Mario Bros. 3* craze created by former Mario games and *The Wizard* brought kids running to stores containing empty shelves (I was one of these kids). The empty shelves were the results of Nintendo's strategy to keep the public thirsty. The strategy worked, and "*Super Mario Bros. 3* sold in incredibly 18 million copies world wide (and grossed \$500 million) which makes it the most sold stand alone video game ever." (nintendoland.com) By 1990, one third of American homes had an NES (there were 30 million total systems). By 1992, the industry was worth 5 billion dollars, which was largely the work of Nintendo.

The multi-billion dollar video game industry that is still alive today wouldn't be the same without Nintendo and its icon, Mario. Mario Mania has shaped video game culture, and will continue to be the benchmark for other game developers to follow. The lessons learned from Hiroshi Yamauchi, Shigeru Miyamoto, and the rest of Nintendo are simple and powerful: Believe in yourself, be persistent, embrace creativity, and don't let anyone tell you that your ideas won't work. We must live by the code of the Mario business and pay attention to the teachings of the Mario philosophy: Work hard with persistence, and play hard with jubilation.

