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# CLASSIC GIANT

## FORGOTTEN GIANT:

### THE BRILLIANT LIFE AND TRAGIC DEATH OF GUNPEI YOKOI



Gunpei Yokoi

When one thinks of Nintendo, the name that instantly springs to mind is that of Shigeru Miyamoto, the celebrated creator of Mario Bros., Donkey Kong, and The Legend of Zelda. However, for over 30 years the company was home to another, less well known, genius – Gunpei Yokoi, the head of Nintendo's storied R&D1 department. While not as famous as Miyamoto, a man that he helped mentor early in his career, Yokoi's innovations made an indelible mark on the video game industry, and quite literally changed the way we play games forever.

#### THE YOUNG INVENTOR

Born into a wealthy family (his father was the director of a pharmaceutical company), Gunpei Yokoi grew up in Kyoto, Japan. As a young man, he excelled in math and science, and

eventually obtained a college degree in electronics. Upon his graduation in 1965, he took work at a Nintendo factory, maintaining the assembly line machines that manufactured the company's popular line of Hanafuda playing cards. His arrival at Nintendo was well timed, as the ambitious Hiroshi Yamauchi had just taken the helm of the company and was determined to expand the scope of its product line to include innovative new gadgets and toys. Recognizing Yokoi's potential, Yamauchi challenged him to create a "great" new toy. As an invertebrate inventor and tinkerer, the young engineer jumped at the chance and designed the Ultra Hand (a mechanical arm extender with a grabbing device on the end). The Ultra Hand was a tremendous success, and sold 1.2 million units in 1970.



Yokoi's Game & Watch handhelds pioneered the use of the now familiar d-pad controller

Yokoi went on to design a number of other mechanical toys, including the Ultra Scope (a small periscope that allowed users to peer around corners), and the Love Tester (a novelty device that measured the electric current generated when a couple held hands). However, it was in 1980 that he would create his first significant invention, Nintendo's series of Game & Watch portable LCD games.

Nintendo had been watching the exploding video game market with great interest, but the company lacked the funds to truly compete with the giant console manufacturers like Atari and Mattel. Home console development was a risky and expensive endeavor, but Gunpei Yokoi had come up with a simple, low-cost alternative – the handheld LCD game. Marketed under the brand name Game & Watch, the units were simplistic action games that were displayed on primitive black-and-white screens. Because the handheld consoles needed

to be small and lightweight, Yokoi decided a traditional joystick controller would be too bulky. To replace it, he created what he called a "control cross," which became the prototype for the familiar digital pads used for the NES, SNES, and controllers of today. The impact of the d-pad can not be overestimated, as it forever changed the way players interacted with video games. Every controller since has been a variation on Yokoi's simple principle.

#### THE COMPANY MAN

The Game & Watch series was a triumph for Yokoi, and there were over 60 different models produced between 1980 and 1989. At the height of the craze, total sales approached 30 million units worldwide. Encouraged by the success of Game & Watch, as well as arcade smashers like Donkey Kong, Nintendo decided to enter the home console market in 1984 when it released the Famicom sys-

tem in Japan (designed by Masayuki Uemura, an engineer hired by Gunpei Yokoi). Despite its popularity in Japan, many retailers in the United States were skeptical of video games after the great industry crash of 1983. Nintendo needed something to convince US toy distributors that the Nintendo Entertainment System was more than just a video game console. Once again, Gunpei Yokoi had the solution, in the



Yokoi spearheaded the development of both the Game Boy and the Game Boy Pocket

Inset: The inventor poses with his greatest creation

form of R.O.B. (Robotic Operating Buddy), a toy robot that reacted and helped users play two NES games, Stack-Up and Gyromite. Although the add-on was of little real use, and was never supported with new software, it did allow Nintendo to overcome the stigma attached to video games at the time. By the time people realized the R.O.B. was essentially a gimmick, they were already hooked on Super Mario Bros.

Although not known as a game designer, Yokoi would spearhead the creation of two classic NES titles, Metroid and Kid Icarus. Metroid, one of the first games to feature a female protagonist, was a deep and complex action/adventure game that explored darker and more adult themes than Nintendo games of the past. To this day, it stands as one of the greatest NES titles, and is set to be revived on the GameCube as Metroid Prime.

With the NES established as the dominant home console, Yokoi began work on a new, cartridge-based handheld gaming system. This project became known

as the Game Boy, and would become his greatest and most enduring accomplishment. The compact unit ran on a tiny 8-bit processor, featured a 2-square-inch monochrome LCD screen, and ran up to 35 hours on four AA batteries. In a brilliant move, Nintendo packaged the Game Boy with the classic puzzler Tetris, a game whose rudimentary graphics and ease of play perfectly complemented the Game Boy's on-the-go aesthetic. The handheld was an instant hit, with the initial shipment of 1 million units selling out almost immediately. Yokoi would design a smaller, more energy-efficient version of the Game Boy in 1996, the Game Boy Pocket. The original Game Boy sold over 50 million units, and cemented Nintendo's control of the handheld market, which continues to this day with its recently released Game Boy Advance system. Over time, handheld gaming would become the cornerstone of the company, spawning the lucrative Pokémon phenomenon and maintaining its profitability during the less-than-spectacular run of the Nintendo 64.

### FALL FROM GRACE

Despite his track record of tireless innovation and fierce loyalty to Nintendo, Yokoi would soon learn that the video game business could be cruel and unforgiving. His next creation, the ill-fated Virtual Boy, would eventually lead to his bitter separation from the company that had employed him for nearly 30 years.

Feeling that game development was becoming stagnant due to a lack of new gameplay concepts, Yokoi began exploring the possibilities of a 3D virtual reality helmet. However, it was soon determined that the head-mounted visor was too heavy. With this in mind, the unit was scaled back in scope, and became a binocular-like eye mask set on a stand. Originally intended to be a full-color system, the cost of creating such a unit was prohibitive. As such, Yokoi chose to outfit the unit with a monochrome red LED screen. This miscalculation would cost him dearly.

It quickly became apparent that the Virtual Boy was a huge mistake. Early press reaction was overwhelmingly negative, with most reporting that the red screen caused painful headaches and nausea. Even

worse, most of the games failed to fully utilize the unit's 3D capabilities, and were generally substandard knock-offs of existing games. Consumers concurred with the press's negative assessment of the Virtual Boy, and the system performed disastrously in stores.

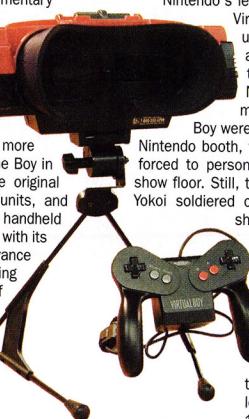
Nintendo's leadership blamed the failure of the Virtual Boy on Yokoi, and (perhaps unwise) set out to publicly humiliate him at the 1995 Shoshinkai trade show in Tokyo. As the Nintendo 64 was being unveiled to much fanfare, Yokoi and the Virtual

Boy were relegated to a small corner of the Nintendo booth, where the respected inventor was forced to personally demonstrate the unit on the show floor. Still, the proud and impeccably dressed Yokoi soldiered on, desperately trying to interest showgoers (who were largely there to see the N64) in his doomed product. Although this sort of punishment is common practice in Japanese business, it was a shabby way to treat a man who had done so much to make Nintendo an industry giant.

Perhaps sensing that his time at Nintendo was over, Yokoi left the company in September 1996. Deciding to strike out on his own, he formed a new company dubbed Koto Laboratory. Appropriately, his first project was another handheld game system, a black-and-white console with a bigger screen and better resolution, which would become the Bandai WonderSwan. Sadly, he would never see it to completion.

### A TRAGIC END

On October 4, 1997, Gumphei Yokoi and a business associate Etsuo Kisoo were driving home on the Horukiko Expressway in Kyoto, Japan. Yokoi's car rear-ended the vehicle in front of him. Following the accident, both men got out of the car to examine the damage to the other vehicle when they were suddenly struck by a passing car. Neither man survived. Only a year after he resigned his post at Nintendo, Gumphei Yokoi was dead at the age of 56. Video games had lost one of its greatest figures, by all accounts a visionary and a gentleman. Though dead, his legacy lives on in the Game Boy Advance, the Metroid series, and the numerous other innovations he brought to the world over the course of his career.



The fallout from the failure of the Virtual Boy would bring Yokoi's career at Nintendo to an end



## THIS MONTH IN GAMING HISTORY

This month in 1992, Sega officially became the leader in video games, breaking the reign of Nintendo, the company that had ruled the roost since the release of the Nintendo Entertainment System in December of 1995. The results of the 1991 holiday season saw Sega's Genesis outselling the Super Nintendo at a nearly 2 to 1 ratio, and by the time final tallies were in, Sega had control of 55 percent of the 16-bit market. Many of these sales were driven by the massive success of Sega's new mascot, Sonic the Hedgehog. Of course, Sega's reign wouldn't last long, as the SNES soon surged back with the successful Donkey Kong Country series. Still, this is a significant event in that Nintendo has never truly dominated video games in the same way since.

# GREATEST GAME OF ALL TIME

By Adam Florida



Every month one of Game Informer's readers picks his or her personal choice for Greatest Game Of All Time.

### BREAKOUT

■ FORMAT MULTIPLE SYSTEMS  
■ PUBLISHER ATARI

With these modern times forcing us to worry about terrorism and biological warfare, life can get pretty complicated. I often find myself yearning for the days of old when these modern worries were nonexistent, a time when things were simpler. For me there is no better way to achieve this sense of simplicity than by engulfing myself in mindless hours of playing video games. And I ask, what game was ever simpler than the classic game Breakout?

The simplicity of Breakout makes other classic games, such as Tetris and Pitfall, comparatively seem as complex as advanced calculus equations. Essentially, the game is nothing more than bouncing a ball against bricks. Should you miss the ball, it is lost forever, and you, and are left with only two balls left to destroy all of the bricks. However, should you find yourself skillful enough to destroy all the bricks, you will advance to the next stage. This stage is exactly the same as the previous one, but the ball begins to move faster, thus making it all the more difficult to hit. I assure you, as the speed of the ball increases, so will your excitement and frustration with this uncomplicated masterpiece of a game.

Breakout was such an ingenious game that it ultimately gave way to other, more complicated games such as Arkanoid and an innumerable amount of Arkanoid clones. These new adaptations of Breakout featured power-ups to collect, enemies to annihilate, and various level setups. Whether or not you prefer these new additions, you can never overlook the simple fact that it all started with Breakout.

So from now on, when the trials and tribulations of everyday life get you down, I urge you to dust off your old Atari and pop in the game that started it all, Breakout! Nothing is more mind-numbingly relaxing than endlessly bouncing a tiny ball against a wall of bricks. Breakout is pure, simple fun for all ages.

