

Nintendo's Space World 1997

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Nintendo's Space World '97: The good, the bad, and the strange • **Good-bye Dural, hello Katana:** A new name and more details on Sega's new machine • **Gaming on a live wire:** Area Networks get personal • **Unhappy holidays:** While 1997 was a booming year for the industry, some companies did better than others



All the news that really matters

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Whether it's called Shoshinkai or Space World, Nintendo's annual trade show is always a heavily attended event, and '97 was no exception



The "best of show" and the main draw were four new N64 titles, including *Zelda*

Nintendo's Space World Exposition (formerly known as Shoshinkai), held in Tokyo last November, was cautiously hailed as a success by Western delegates. The unveiling of playable versions of *The Legend of Zelda*, *F-Zero X*, and *Yoshi's Story* were everything that had been hoped for, and *1080° Snowboarding* proved there's innovation beyond Nintendo's established game franchises. On the other hand, the Japanese launch of Nintendo 64DD has been postponed from March until June (with no news of a U.S. release date), and there was no evidence to suggest that third-party

N64 development is getting any better. Plus, there's no guarantee that *Pocket Monsters* — far and away Nintendo's biggest success of 1997 — will repeat its bizarre success outside of Japan.

None of the products shown for 64DD are directly applicable to the U.S. market — the *Mario Artist* series lets gamers create their own art and 3D models, but it isn't more than anyone with a PC can do. With 64DD limited mostly to productivity apps and a *Pocket Monsters* RPG with no proven market outside Japan, will 64DD become just an interesting footnote to the Nintendo 64 story? Nintendo of America's VP of Marketing George Harrison thinks it's too early to draw conclusions. "Certainly it hasn't been sidelined. It's still in the starting gate. Our strategy has always been that we're not going to let it go until we're absolutely convinced that there's a good market for it." As for switching *Zelda* from disk to cartridge, "it's a move to take the best advantage of a great title," he reasons. "And we want everyone who has N64 hardware to be able to take advantage of it."

But the result is that 64DD's future does not look good. And whether or not it was ever a serious mainstream contender is now open for debate. In hindsight, it would be

easy to dismiss the project as a clever foil for criticism of Nintendo's cartridge-based policy. Certainly the creativity software demonstrated on 64DD failed to excite Western showgoers. And despite the preview of *F-Zero X* add-on disks featuring extra cars, tracks, and "ghost" opponents, there was little to indicate that 64DD will be a must-have purchase.

Jez San of Argonaut (a company that has traditionally worked very closely with Nintendo, notably on *StarFox* and *Wild Trax*) offers one possible explanation for 64DD's delay. "Rumors have been circulating for a while that recently within Nintendo the main priority has been *Pocket Monsters*, even at the expense of N64," he reveals. "I heard they were taking development staff off other games and projects to make sure that *Pocket Monsters* was done on time. Mr. Yamauchi's speech today confirmed that *Pocket Monsters* is foremost in his mind, and maybe this is why 64DD has been pushed back." Either way, we don't recommend holding your breath: 64DD isn't scheduled for a U.S. release any time soon.

Shigeru Miyamoto's brace of games on display all lived up to expectations. *The Legend of Zelda* was the focal point of the show floor, with a small portion of the game world available for play-

testing. All delegates seemed impressed, with the general consensus being that yes, it's even better than *Super Mario 64*. *F-Zero X* offers four-player, high-speed futuristic racing. *Yoshi's Story* takes 2D gaming to new heights, with N64's analog controller giving a new twist to the platform-based, run-and-jump gameplay. And *1080° Snowboarding*, a surprise title from a newly formed group within Nintendo's Kyoto-based HQ, offers a subtle blend of high-tech simulation and arcade action (see page 78).

Third-party software, however, mostly continues to suck. With legions of second-rate clones making up the third-party assault in Japan, there seems to be little improvement from last year. San offers an opinion: "Very few third-party developers are actually working with N64," he points out, "and this is partly because development systems are hard to come by and partly because publishers willing to take the risk are hard to come by. So if you can't get a deal to do a game for Nintendo itself, there's little point developing an N64 game because it will be very tough finding anyone else to publish it. Also, N64 isn't exactly an easy machine to develop for because it's cartridge-based, which means you have to spend a lot of time working out how to make the game fit into the cartridge, on top of the time it takes you to figure out how to make a good game."

Is there light at the end of the tunnel? Harrison reckons so and argues that the obstacles to third-party success are diminishing. "We were probably not as good as we could have been at providing them with technical support early on," he explains. "At the time of N64's launch we had our 'dream team' strategy and we really narrowed down the group of people who were given an early look at the machine and were given the early support that they needed. And even some of these people struggled. Even now, as we expand our support to a larger universe of licensees, we've not had all the technical support in place to do that. Besides, some licensees have



Ah, the Japanese trade show: from the obligatory booth girls to the legions of fans


more expertise and resources than others, and it's a challenge for many people to match the time and dollar investment that Nintendo puts into its own titles."

Certainly, recent cuts in N64 cart costs have prompted more third parties to sign up, but it's too early to see the results of this yet.

Nintendo Chairman Hiroshi Yamauchi's annual address to the Japanese videogame industry is always a highlight. This year was no exception. "Overseas, Nintendo 64 has been highly regarded. But in Japan, the feedback hasn't been as good as anticipated," he began. "Perhaps some people think it's because there aren't enough games released, or maybe people say it's because there are no role-playing games." He paused, then dropped his bombshell. "In fact, the [Japanese] videogame market is no longer driven mainly by TV-based console games," was his startling diagnosis. "The recent videogame console market is losing momentum, and naturally it's because of too much boring or complicated software that ordinary users can't enjoy playing."

His prescription for how the videogame industry should get out of this fix? Two things: First, learn from the record-breaking success of the Game Boy's *Pocket Monsters*

series; and second, when it comes to releasing console games, it's quality not quantity that counts. U.S. gamers will be forgiven for raising an incredulous eyebrow at Yamauchi's grim view of the videogame market and for asking, "What the hell are *Pocket Monsters*?" But *Space World* is a show for the Japanese market, and Yamauchi was addressing specific Japanese concerns. In Japan, *Pocket Monsters* on Game Boy is both the best-selling game of 1997 and the best-selling Game Boy cart of all time. It's provided a much-needed boost for Nintendo in an otherwise tough year, although whether it will settle into a long-term stable market or succeed anywhere outside of Japan is doubtful. As for the "quality not quantity" mantra, there's both value in what he says and a need to take this stance, given the continued lack of third-party support for N64.

In all, an interesting show and further proof that no one makes videogames better than Nintendo. While Yamauchi may be looking to *Pocket Monsters* to keep him smiling in '98, Western gamers have at least four great new N64 games to look forward to. And maybe even 64DD — but for that, we'll have to wait for E3 in May. 



The show also displayed several N64 add-ons, including one that allowed *Pocket Monsters* for Game Boy to connect to N64