The Nintendo 64: The Past, Present & Future

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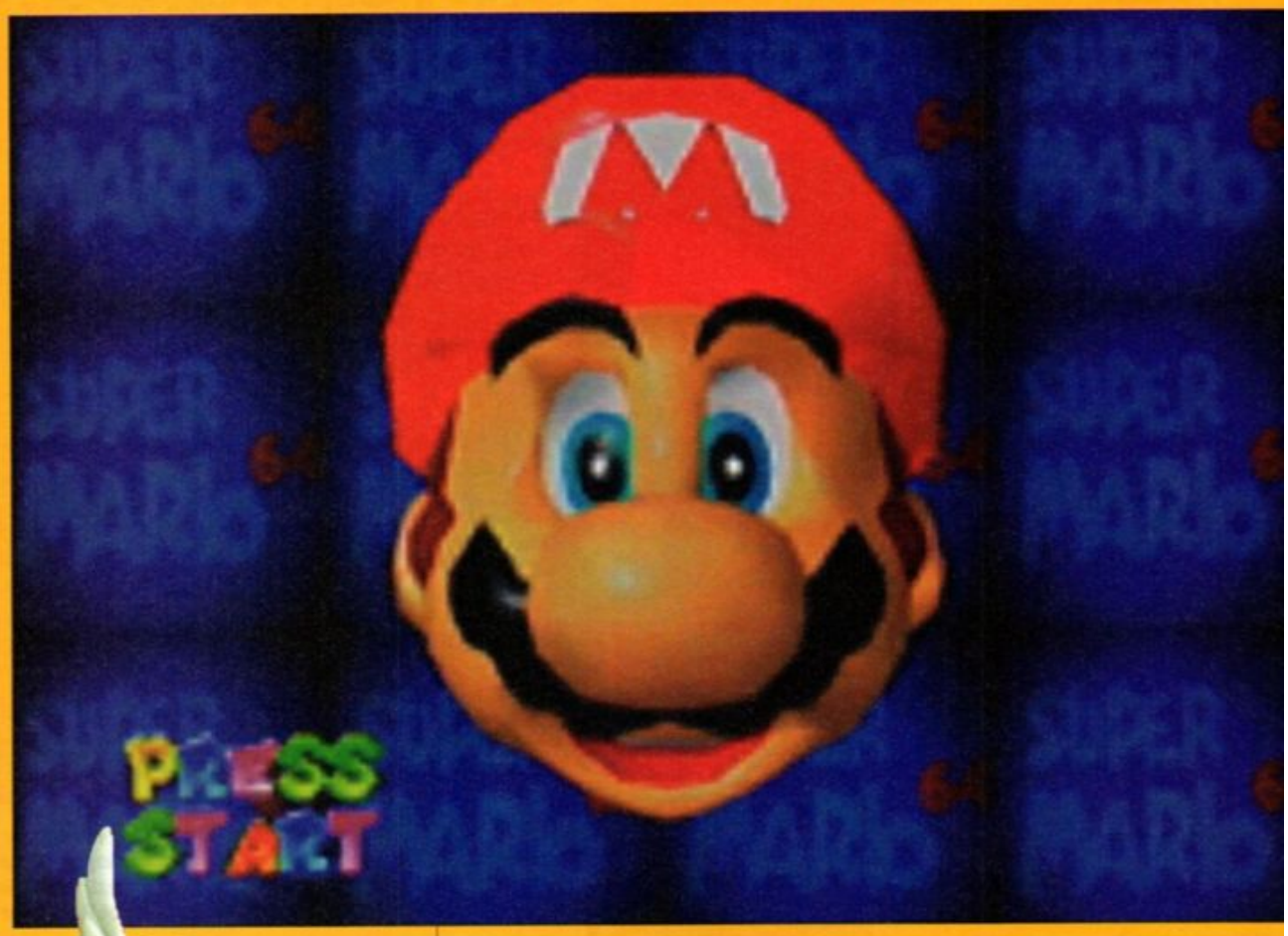

Way back in 1992 the gaming scene was ruled by the 2D gaming machines of Nintendo and Sega. T Streetfighters, Mortal Kombats and Diddy Kong Countrys reigned supreme, but the large comp nies knew that the progression of technology meant that the days of the Super Nintendo and S Megadrive were coming to an end. Furthermore, CD technology was becoming readily available at an affor able price and a new player in the game market, 3DO, capitalized on Sega's and Nintendo's failure to act qui ly enough on technology's advancements and launched the 3DO game machine at the end of 1993. Still, wh Nintendo was enjoying a late market surge for the SNES with the hugely successful Donkey Kong Coun series, the had secretly made plans to launch an add-on device for the Super Nintendo that was CD based a would be produced in part by the huge electronics company, Sony. Unfortunately, this deal never eventua and Sony went on to produce their own console that is now known as the Sony Playstation.

Meanwhile the 3DO company was enjoying mixed success with its own console, due to a lack of killer so ware and also that the console wasn't the quantum leap in 3D visuals that it initially promised to be. Sega a Sony had already announced their respective 32 bit consoles' release dates and the pressure was on Ninten to announce a next-generation plan of their own. On August 23, 1993, Nintendo announced a partnersh

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do 64

The PAST, PRESENT & FUTURE

This Nintendo/Sony concept never left the drawing board

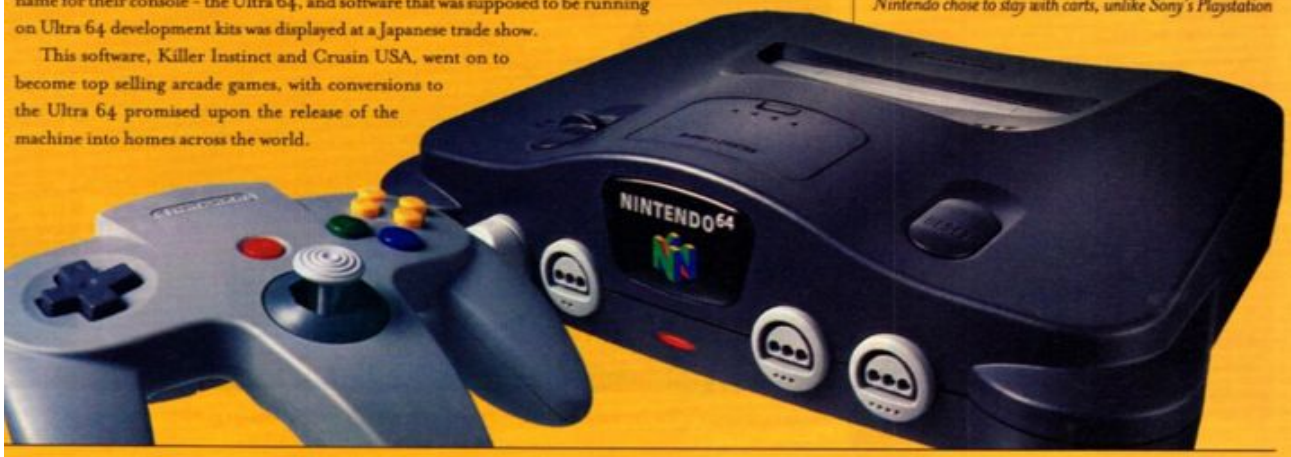
Analogue control and movement, as Nintendo stressed, was the future of all 3D games.

Nintendo chose to stay with carts, unlike Sony's Playstation

with the computer chip giant, Silicon Graphics, to create a fully 3D 64 bit console that would support effects and functions that the competition's hardware could only dream of. Project Reality was born, and was promised to launch at a price tag roughly half that of Sega's and Sony's own game consoles. Sporting such effects as bilinear filtering, anti aliasing, mipp mapping and hardware z-buffering, Project Reality would create graphics that were claimed to be equal to Silicon Graphics own workstations, which cost over $50,000.

In early May the next year, Nintendo astonished the gaming world by announcing that their 64 bit console would be cartridge based, and not follow the Playstation, 3DO and Saturn's lead in embracing CD technology. Nintendo claim that their cartridges would include compression techniques that would allow them to store more than enough data for the latest 3D games. One month later Nintendo announced the official name for their console - the Ultra 64, and software that was supposed to be running on Ultra 64 development kits was displayed at a Japanese trade show.

This software, Killer Instinct and Crusin USA, went on to become top selling arcade games, with conversions to the Ultra 64 promised upon the release of the machine into homes across the world.



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Terminology

Confused with the terms us buttheads use in game reviews and features in N64 Gamer? Well, you're not the only one. I had to go and look them up myself, so here they are for you.

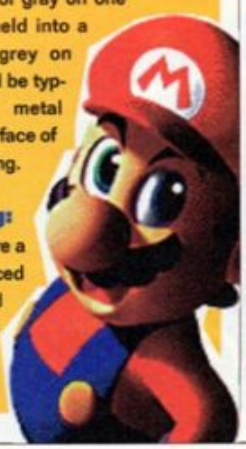
Anti-aliasing :
This is the process where the jagged lines are removed from the edges of polygons and the patterns in the polygons are smoothed out to give a sharper image. It effectively makes lower resolution images look a great deal more sharper.

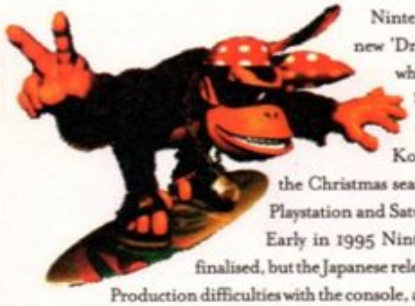
Bi-Linear Filtering:
This is the process where the colours on texture maps are smoothed out after they are drawn onto polygons. It basically ensures that the colours on images are smoothed together and that no sharp lines occur between two colours on the same polygon. If the texture map isn't very detailed then the process of bilinear filtering will result in the polygon becoming blurry, which is common in some N64 games.

Environmental Mapping:
Is the process where a reflective surface is created by texture mapping. The robot in Blast Corps and metallic Mario in Super Mario 64 are examples of environmental mapping.

Gouraud Shading:
The process of texture mapping a polygon to show a transition in colour from one side of a polygon to another. For example, gouraud shading could be used on a metal surface with a light shade of gray on one side that would meld into a darker shade of grey on another. This would be typically used on metal objects, like the surface of a fighter plane's wing.

Light Sourcing:
is the process where a light source is placed within a 3D world and all areas in that world are shaded according to the





Nintendo were now making announcements in regards to their new 'Dream Team' which consisted of programming companies who would ensure that the level of software quality for the Ultra 64 would be incredibly high. Indeed, one of the dream team's first members, Rare, had their own Donkey Kong Country games racking in millions for Nintendo over the Christmas season in 1994, helping Nintendo weather the storm of the Playstation and Saturn's launches in Japan at this time.

Early in 1995 Nintendo announced that the Ultra 64's chipset had been finalised, but the Japanese release date of the console would be delayed until April in 1996. Production difficulties with the console, and the rush to finish launch software had set things back for Nintendo, but they did manage to have a full public viewing of the console in November of 1995 at the Shoskikkai show in Japan. For the first time the console was on display to the public, with the new revolutionary controller that Nintendo promised would change the face of 3D gaming also on display. Although Sega and Sony were to offer their own analogue controllers at a later date, Nintendo's own controller offered analogue control on all of the Ultra 64's games, something that was a major selling point for the Ultra 64. Analogue control and movement, as Nintendo stressed, was the future of all 3D games. A 50% Mario 64 also kept show onlookers intrigued and highly anxious for a Japanese launch, which wasn't to occur until June of the next year, due to another set of production delays that were announced in February 1996. At this time Nintendo also announced that the Ultra 64 would be known worldwide as the Nintendo 64, and launch dates for September in the US and April in European countries had also been confirmed.

Finally on the 23 of June in Japan the Nintendo 64 rolled out into public game stores amidst much hype and press. The delays that the N64 had encountered took their toll on the air of anticipation surrounding the launch of the N64. Also, the fact that the N64 no longer held its promoted price advantage over its competition due to the recent drop in the Saturn and Playstation's prices, had critics believing that the N64's launch would be much less than spectacular. And they would have been right, except for one thing: Super Mario 64. Much more so than Playstation's Ridge Racer and Saturn's Virtua Fighter, Mario 64 was seen to be a giant step forward in videogaming. Not only had the standard of visuals leapt right over what had been seen as revolutionary with the launch of Playstation's Ridge Racer, Mario 64 really set new grounds in immersive gameplay that had gamers feeling like they were really a part of the Mario 64's 3D environment. Also, even with the supposed limitations of the cartridge format, Mario 64 had 15 massive worlds to explore, with not even the slightest hint of a 'now loading' screen anywhere. The second launch title, Pilotwings 64, was almost as impressive. Paradigm, another member of the Dream Team had delivered an excellent sequel to their original SNES game, this time taking full advantage of the N64's hardware. Featuring the largest environments in any console game to-date, Pilotwings 64 had incredibl

Pilotwings was one of the first N64 games to truly set the standards for next-genration gaming.

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Nintendo's own software continued to sell incredibly well, but third party software support was beginning to slow in 1998

3D visuals and almost perfect control that made the game an absolute joy to look at and a dream to play. Again, the visual improvements over the current 32 bit consoles, the Playstation and Saturn, were reason enough to purchase the N64 with stunning scenery that looked almost photo-realistic at every turn and frame-rates that made the game a smooth realistic simulation of flight. The N64's immediate launch was a startling success, with over 500,000 units sold on the first day.

Things weren't that rosy for too long in Japan though, as 3rd party software was almost non-existent and titles like Zelda and Mario Kart were nowhere in sight. Secondly, Nintendo's long time game partner, Squaresoft, had moved camps to Sony and announced that their legendary Final Fantasy series would appear only on Playstation. Japan, filled with a population of RPG gamers, were losing interest in the N64 and even the launch of Mario Kart 64 and Lylat Wars (Star Fox 64 in the US and Japan) had little positive effect on the N64's popularity in Japan.

Nevertheless, the US launch of the N64 went ahead in September 1996 and broke all previous sales records and subsequently reduced Sega's position in the American game's market to third place. Even though the Playstation constantly had more titles entering the market than the N64, Nintendo's games would always rate as high, if not higher, than Sony's, with new games like Goldeneye and Mario Kart 64 notching up 500,000 units within a matter of weeks after the launch in the US.

The Present

The launch of the Nintendo 64 in March of '97 was easily the biggest and most anticipated event the Australian gaming community had ever experienced. It had been nearly five years since loyal Nintendo players had first purchased their Super Nintendos in 1992. That's a long time to make people wait for their next dose of Mario madness which is exactly why the N64 launch was greeted with such incredible enthusiasm. Tens of thousands of units were pre-ordered and thousands of gamers queued outside videogame stores all over the country, anxiously waiting for their chance to get their hands on the machine of their dreams. Over 50,000 Australians bought N64s in the first month alone. This is basically because of one reason: Mario 64. The game was being purchased by over 95% of people buying the machine. However, unlike in Japan, the Australian launch did not depend solely on the merits of Mario. In Australia, people buying their N64s could choose from a number of strong launch titles like Mario Kart, Wave Race, Pilotwings, Turok: Dinosaur Hunter and Killer Instinct. This was a powerful lineup of software that appealed to a wide audience. Games like Mario and Mario Kart naturally appealed to the young at heart but they also contained that typical Nintendo fun-factor that ensured they could be enjoyed by anyone. Mario Kart also proved incredibly popular because it was the first title to take advantage of the Nintendo's four control pad ports. Although multiplayer games had been available in the past via multi-taps, it had never really become a popular gaming phenomenon

Mario 64 redefined 3D graphics and gameplay when released in 1996

light source's position. We can see this in games like Forsaken and Turok 2 when weapons are fired along corridors as the corridors light up from the light source that is the weapon discharging (or its laser beam etc).

Mipp Mapping:
When a polygon is drawn in a perspective that implies that it is far away from the viewing screen (a car on a distant hill in a racing game, for example), the texture maps on the car's polygons can become distorted because they have been reduced to fit on the car. Mipp mapping uses pre-drawn texture maps that don't have any distortion in their patterns, so the mipp mapped polygon appears with a normal pattern on its face. This process basically ensures that all polygons viewed from a distance have good quality texture maps.

Polygon:
A three (triangle) or four (rectangle) sided object that is used to construct a 3D object. Six polygons would be used to construct a cube in a 3D world, for example. Polygons make up everything that we see in 3D games today.

Texture map:
Is a bitmap (small pattern) that is pasted onto a polygon. Texture maps are used to decorate or colour polygons to make them resemble real-life objects.

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This rumble feature, along with the analogue controller, was the second large advantage that Nintendo claimed to have over its gaming competition.

Full screen gaming, introduced in Shadows of the Empire and Goldeneye, was one of the N64's main advanatges over its competition

because of the cost of the multi-taps and the lack of any really good software. Mario Kart changed all that because now you could enjoy an incredible four player experience by simply taking your control pad and walking around to your mate's place. Games like Turok: Dinosaur Hunter broadened the machine's appeal because it was an undeniably mature game that had the necessary hi-tech weaponry and insane body counts to ensure success with the 'harder' breed of gamers. Like Mario 64, Turok offered clear proof of the Nintendo's clear graphical superiority over the 32-bit formats. The game was so impressive in fact that it still managed to shift big numbers of units despite the high price tag of $129.95. However, while Nintendo had assured gamers of their strict quality control, there were a couple of less than brilliant titles that slipped through the net. Games like Shadows of the Empire and Crusin USA were definitely disappointing considering the high standards set by the other launch software.

After a very successful launch, Nintendo continued to strengthen its presence in the Australian gaming community. There was not a huge number of games released in the months leading up to Christmas but clever marketing ensured healthy growth. In September Nintendo offered a $100 cash-back for anyone that bought the N64 for $299. This effectively reduced the price to $199 and managed to shift an extra 37,000 units in that month alone. Early the next month, Nintendo chose to release Lylat Wars, which also came with the rumble pak for $99.95. This rumble feature, along with the analogue controller, was the second large advantage that Nintendo claimed to have over its gaming competition.

Shortly after this the market was flooded with a great range of new games in preparation for the Christmas festivities. Nintendo's success in this Christmas season depended on a lot of factors. Nintendo's marketing strategy kicked into overdrive and they lowered the N64's price to $199, to effectively compete with Sony's Playstation and Sega's Saturn. However, the single greatest asset the Nintendo had was its software. The N64's launch may have belonged to Mario but there is no doubt that Goldeneye owned the Christmas season. No other games previously had successfully taken a popular licence like James Bond and backed it up with a great playing game. In Goldeneye the player was given the chance to really become a secret service agent. The game provided a tantalizing combination of frantic blasting action, complex mission objectives and the ability to dispatch guards silently, using stealth to avoid detection. On top of this Goldeneye provided a brilliant multiplayer deathmatch that has become an obsession for many

The Nintendo 64 became a leaping platform for older Super Nintendo games. Lylat Wars (Star Fox 64) is a prime example

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As the first game to use a high resolution mode, NFL Quarterback Club showed some of the N64's true potential.

fans of the game. At the new price point of $79.95, Goldeneye and the recently released Diddy Kong Racing made the N64 much more attractive to the younger audience who considered the $99.95 standard pricepoint quite unreasonable

A new 3rd party N64 programming company, Iguana, launched NFL Quarterback Club '99 which was the first title to run in the N64's high resolution mode and provided more evidence of the N64's untapped graphical power. With over 20 players running around on-screen at once, all at a smooth frame-rate, the result was easily the most photo-realistic sports title ever seen.

Contrary to Nintendo's Quality stance on software, more and more games were slipping into the Australian gaming stores that should have had no place on the N64 system. F1- Pole Position, War Gods, Clayfighter and Extreme G started a trend that would unfortunately continue way into 1998. Despite some disappointing releases, the vast majority of N64 titles continued to offer the sort of quality we've come to expect. Games like Top Gear Rally, San Francisco Rush, ISS '98, Duke Nukem and Mace: The Dark Ages are a few examples. By the end of 1997 Nintendo had an extremely successful first year in which they managed to sell over 300,000 N64s to Australian gamers.

The new year saw a slump in N64 releases to the Australian market, and apart from one or two good titles, like WCW Vs NWO and Quake 64, the standard of software being released had slipped dramatically. In the tradition Nintendo previously set with giving secondary characters their own unique videogames (ala Donkey Kong Country), Yoshi made his debut on the N64. Rather than staying faithful to the 3D graphics standard for games that were on the N64, Yoshi remained 2 dimensional (2D), like its predecessor on the Super Nintendo. Yoshi's Story's gameplay was simple and retained none of the complex gameplay and huge levels that the SNES Yoshi and Mario games were renowned for, as a result the game didn't make much of an impression on N64 gamers.

In April Iguana was the first company who managed to release what was seen to be the first second-generation game for the N64. Forsaken displayed advanced real-time lighting and silky smooth frame rates and a 4 player split screen game that supplied some of the finest blasting action on the N64. Unfortunately, the game's corridor-based science-fiction theme was a bit too different for most gamers' tastes and the title did not receive the attention it deserved.

1080 Snowboarding sounded a comeback for the in-house programmers at Nintendo when it was released in June. The game was by the same team responsible for Wave Race and it offered the perfect mixture of snowboarding realism and excellent arcade gameplay. In the same month Iguana continued their strong support for the N64 with All Star Baseball '99 and later with WWF Warzone. Both games were great examples of their formidable skill as games programmers. The high resolution graphics were even more stunning than their earlier efforts and the attention to detail was nothing short of staggering.

Playstation continued to flood the game market with mediocre titles, with the competition allow-

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Nintendo's tried and true gameplay continues to shine

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ing the N64 to hold a good position in the marketplace with its smaller range of quality software. Banjo-Kazooie, F-Zero, Mortal Kombat and Mission Impossible launched later in '98 along with F1 World Grand Prix, ISS'98 and WipeOut 64. Mortal Kombat 4 finally gave N64 gamers a fighting game that had a respectable 3D engine and excellent gameplay, with the lack of a good fighting game being a sore point of the N64 throughout '98. Mission Impossible, although no Goldeneye Killer, offered some interesting alternative gameplay elements that will make it a favourite among some gamers.

Despite a shaky first few months, the quality of Nintendo software has continued to improve to the state where each month sees the release of more and more titles that take advantage of the machine's power to produce really amazing software.

THE FUTURE

The immediate future of the N64 can be summed up in one word, and one word alone - Zelda. With the drought of quality in-house titles that has been upon the N64 in the recent year, Nintendo needs Zelda to be THE game for the N64 in 1998. With the recent delay and possible scrapping of the 64DD in Japan, Nintendo have wisely moved the once 64DD-destined Zelda over to a new 32Mb cartridge in the hope that their commitment to large sized cartridge games may extinguish all interest in the 64DD itself. This tactic may well work, and is a smart move on the part of Nintendo, considering the recent history of various doomed add-on devices, like Sega's 32X, Mega CD and Nintendo's very own Famicom (NES) disk drive that once appeared in Japan. Zelda, it seems, is the title Nintendo need to re-affirm gamers belief in that old Nintendo/ Miyamoto magic and boost sales in Japan, where the Super Famicom (SNES) once reigned supreme.

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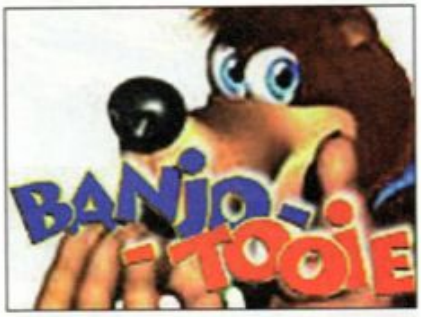
There's no doubt that the two major software companies involved in the future of gaming on the N64 are Rare and Iguana. Apart from the odd title from other 3rd party companies, these two software companies are the only ones who consistently show improvement in their Nintendo 64 software and also remain dedicated to producing games on the system.

Rare, who have been software partners to Nintendo since the early days of the SNES, have a great deal of time and money invested in software development for the N64, and this is quite remarkable considering that they are a relatively small software company. Their upcoming titles; Perfect Dark, Conker's Quest, Get Force Gemini and Banjo-Tooie look set to push the N64 further and further yielding better quality 3D graphics, gameplay and sound. Perhaps their biggest future title, Donkey Kong Country 64, still remains a mystery as to whether the game will be: 2D or 3D. The original Donkey Kong series went a long way in saving the SNES from an early death at the hands of the Saturn and Playstation's hype in 1993, but the popularity of another 2D side scrolling platform game, ala Yoshi's Story, is certainly questionable on the N64 today.



Rare continues support for the N64 with quality games.

Also showing a great deal of promise in the recent N64 titles is UK and US based software developers, Iguana. As the first company to achieve the incredible high resolution mode in NFL Quarterback Club, Iguana have gone from strength to strength with All Star Baseball '99, Forsaken, WWF Warzone, Turok 2, and the upcoming South Park 64, WWF Warzone 2, All Star Baseball 2000, Shadowman and an as yet unnamed soccer game that will also use the N64's high resolution mode. More than anyone, Iguana seem willing to challenge the censorship board on the topic of violence in videogames. Turok 2 sets new levels in graphic violence that are not tasteless examples of violent acts but rather graphic enhancements to an already excellent game. The issue of censorship for the N64, is something that is fading more and more from the public spotlight each day and the hope that the N64 may be seen as an adult's gaming machine may be something that we'll see happening sooner than we think.

Most importantly though, is Iguana's eager adoption of the N64's ram expansion which will ensure that their games keep at the forefront of graphics on the N64 by offering greater detail and better sound (see ram expansion in Techno). In the light of the upcoming Dreamcast game console and the Playstation 2, the ram expansion cart will give the N64 the added advantage that it will need to see it ride through the rough storm created by these next-generation machines' hype in the marketplace.

One thing we are sure of though, is that Nintendo will continue to produce N64 games for a long time to come. With the N64's userbase now at over 20 million worldwide, it makes great business sense for Nintendo to keep supporting their products. Even though the N64 may be losing some of its 3rd party developers due to the cost of manufacturing carts over CDs, this means that companies, like Rare, and Iguana, will keep developing games for the N64 as their product has to compete in a much less competitive market, unlike the Playstation's whose market is swamped with hundreds of titles that are fighting for the consumer's dollar.

Either way, count on N64 Gamer to keep you informed on any changes in the line up of software or changes to the N64's hardware in the years ahead.

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