

Making HistoWii

You can't spell William without Wii.

by Bill Zam

Baseball fans remember October 1977 as the month Reggie Jackson hit three home runs on three pitches from three different pitchers in the World Series. There was another big hit that month: the release of the Atari 2600 video game system. Since that time, generations of children – and people who still think they're children – have been defined by the video game platform they grew up with. If the seventies was the Me generation, then the Aughts are the Wii generation.¹

Say what you will about Xbox, the PS3, or the various handhelds on the market now, but this era will be remembered for the introduction of Nintendo's Wii system, which as you probably know by now is the first home video game console to feature wireless remotes that allow the user to realistically mimic physical activities such as golfing, throwing darts, cooking, or even swinging a baseball bat like Mr. October. A sensor about the size of a ruler² plugs into the game and receives signals from the remotes.

The basic game package includes the console, a five-game Wii Sports disc, and controllers for one player, which is now standard in the video game industry. This is based on the assumptions that consumers are going to ante up for the second remote despite the obvious rip-off, and that all gamers are friendless über-g33ks.

When my eight-year-old son Michael broke his elbow last summer, his great uncle bought him the Wii to help keep him active. "Great uncle" not only because he is *my* uncle, not my son's, but also because – let's face it – he bought us a freaking Wii! Did I say us? I meant Michael. It's for Michael.

He also bought it when it was the must-have toy of the year. Like Cabbage Patch Kids, the Furby and Tickle Me Elmo (now with 10 percent more lead!) before it, kids really had to Wii in 2007, and not just after a long car ride.³ I considered writing this article last fall in order to give my readers some shopping advice for Christmas, but at the time, people were murdering each other for these systems and I didn't want anybody "shopping" at my house, if you know what I mean. *[Note: if you do know what I mean, don't forget to check in with your parole officer.]*

We've come a long way from Atari and the other games that were available when I was growing up. My younger readers are probably saying, "Dude, Electronic Battleship doesn't count." *[Note: extensive TV watching tells me that younger readers say "dude" a lot.]* But if you know what a Commodore 64 is – or even who The Commodores were – remembering computer games before they were *video* games will be easy like Sunday morning. The first computer game I recall was a Dungeons and Dragons text quest my Dad brought home from work, which challenged you to make the right decision when presented with a *Choose Your Own Adventure* type story [*"Dude – what's Choose Your Own Adventure?"*]⁴ For instance, when confronted by an enemy, you would type CROSS BRIDGE or SWING AXE. Of course, these were limited to pre-programmed choices, so "CHALLENGE TROLL TO DANCE-OFF" was rarely a successful option.

As the decades passed, games got bigger and systems got smaller: Intellivision, ColecoVision, Nintendo NES, Sega Genesis. In 1994, I remember switching off my Sega CD *Jeopardy* game

¹ If you have trouble with Wii generation, ask your doctor about FLOMAX. This may or may not be the last infantile joke about urination in this article.

² The office supply kind of ruler, which are usually 12 inches, as opposed to your average dictator, who measures in at about 5'6". Napoleon really skewed the average.

³ It was a pretty safe bet I wasn't done.

⁴ And who *did* kill Harlowe Thrombie anyway?

and stumbling upon the police in pursuit of O.J. Simpson. By then, a game system's shelf life was about as long as a slow-speed Bronco chase. By the time I could say, "*Who is A.C. Cowlings, Alex?*" Sega CD was off the market and I was looking to unload a cheap copy of Sewer Shark.⁵

Thanks to technological advancement, many of the games that embellished our childhood are now available in retro bundles with dozens of games on a single disc. Whether the soundtrack of your youth was Pitfall Harry swinging over a triad of crocs, or Mario collecting coins by smashing his dome into a cube like a deranged mental patient, you can now relive the magic...for about 12 seconds. That's about how long it takes to realize that these "classic" games, to put it bluntly, now *clash-suck*. It's GAME OVER for Dreamcast, the original PlayStation and Nintendo GameCube, which all once dominated the market. It's inevitable the Wii will go the same route, but for now, people are still up in arms about it.

Or should I say up without arms? One of the coolest features of the Wii is customizable characters – known as Mii's – which during game play often appear with no limbs. Designing these kitschy little caricatures, with adjustable facial features, height and weight, is a great way to gather with the entire family and show them how fat and ugly they really are.

The homophonic name is appropriate: when the game is on, Wii are family. Everybody plays. The number one target age group, of course, is still *tweens*, which is the also the number one most annoying word in this article, except for *dungarees*, which I have just inserted gratuitously. Apart from the fact that tweens have no jobs, they are also best equipped to withstand the exercise regimen. You didn't hear it here first, because I was too out of breath to tell you, but you will hear it again: you can get a serious workout with this thing.

After picking up a virtual ball and bowling pain-free for the first time in years, my mother showed me an AARP article promoting the Wii for seniors as a low-impact aerobic workout. I should warn you, however, as Nintendo does, about the potential for high impact. So far I've stuck my own hand in a ceiling fan (Mii bowling), gotten knuckle-rapped by my wife's vicious forehand (Shii tennis) and been crotch-boxed by my toddler son (Hii boxing). Yes, even the wee play the Wii. My one-year-old has been known to open a can of Wii whoop-ass (now with 10 percent more lead!).

Boxing is one of the games where the Mii's have hands, but no arms. This is appropriate, since it feels like mine have fallen off after facing some of the tougher opponents. One day between rounds, I crumpled in a heap on our sectional next to cornerman Michael, pleading, "Cut me, Mick!" He provided a memorable tip: "Give 'im a couple of hookers, Dad!" His punch terminology may need refining, but the advice would have worked like a charm if I had used the strategy the night before the fight.

You can even test your health each day as Wii Sports challenges you with three tasks from random sports, rating your Wii Fitness age from 20 to 80. With additional features such as wireless networking, news feeds and game downloads, the Wii could be the hottest video game for some time. Then again, if I turn it off now and switch to the news, they'll probably be talking about the next great system.

What the...O.J. with the cops? I guess some things never change.

For hardcore gaming advice, don't visit www.billzam.com.

⁵ If you're interested, I still have it.