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Welcome to GF's first ever hands-on Ultra 64 coverage. Before you dive in, please note that these games are between 20% and 50% complete. *Mario 64*, *Kirby Bowl 64* were the only two playable games at the show, the rest were

demo'd on video. Nintendo balked on more playable games to cur the early criticisms inherent in many publications. As you, I, and Yamauchi know, many publications pass judgment based on unfinished work. Nintendo's head honcho wasn't going to let anyone destroy his day in the sun. Except for *Mario 64*, all these games will look quite different the next time you see them. Also note that to see an Ultra game (either via scans or video grabs, both of which hurt dramatically), is one thing; to see and play an Ultra game is another. What I'm trying to say is that these screen shots simply do not do the games justice. Unfortunately, setting up our Mac's on the show floor for some early GameFan RGB grabs was strictly out of the question, so as usual, we've been reduced to slide scans and video grabs which lose much resolution in the make ready process.

Nintendo has indeed delivered, as promised, a machine capable of taking us to a completely new level that, for the time being,



Here's an in depth look at Nintendo's revolutionary (some say radical) 3-D game con-

troller for their revolutionary game console, the Ultra 64 (called Nintendo 64 in Japan).

On first impression, the U64 controller seems huge for two reasons: Number one, by nature of all its functions, the controller needs to be fairly big and complex, and indeed it is (memory card receptacle, digital and analog directional pads, two action buttons, L and R buttons, start button, 4 dedicated directional buttons and also an auxiliary "Z" trigger button on the bottom of the controller for a whopping 10 functional buttons and 2 directional pads in all... where!). Number two, when placed in close proximity to the hyper-svelte Ultra 64 console (which at only 10.23 inches wide, 7.48 inches deep, 2.67 inches high and weighing in at a featherly 2.42 lbs. is even smaller than the compact Sony PS), any game controller would look positively gargantuan in comparison. Upon closer scrutinization, a few things became apparent.

First of all, believe it or not, the Ultra controller is only a few millimeters wider than a SNES pad. Also FYI, the right and left hand grips are just as long as the grips on an American PlayStation pad, but only about 2/3 as wide. The center grip is as large as the grips on a PS but it's about 30% bigger than the outer two. The L and R are in the same position and angle as they are on the SNES and they are about as far away from the D-pad as the L1 and R1 buttons on a PlayStation. The D pad is in the same place as it is on a SNES and typical of Nintendo (i.e. it's functional and unexciting).

Taking center stage (almost literally) is the much ballyhooed, 3-D thumbstick. Unlike the digital D-pad (digital meaning the pad is either in the neutral "off" position, or it's "on" when it's pushed towards one of its 8 directions), the thumbstick is an analog or "stepless" controller. Not only do you have true 3-D play control with the U64's analog pad, (convenient since most Ultra games will probably be 3-D) Nintendo's hoping to achieve surgical precision. In theory, you'll be limited only by your finger dexterity, not pad limitations. You can use the pad in SMB 64 to make the billionaire Brooklyn plumber turn at infinite angles, slide to a stop... then walk... then run... - like I said... revolutionary. The only down side is that you have to grip the controller with the middle and right hands to play with this control scheme, the one used by nearly all of the initial releases. This may seem awkward to gamers used to symmetrical

has no equal in the home console market. The hardware alone is spectacular, but the real proof is in the innovative game designs which are just beginning to take shape. The controller is a whole 'nother story, which you'll read about here.

I cannot stress enough how early everything at Shoshinkai was. It's way too early to form an opinion, other than the fact that this hardware marks one of the most impressive technological breakthroughs in gaming history, and further, will indeed be above comparison. The Ultra 64 is in a world all its own, a 3D world that shows incredible promise. Nothing pops, shimmerers or glitches. They are clean to the point of disbelief even at an early stage. The only drawback is that it may be quite some time (up to a year) before we see any third party titles out of Japan. America will have a handful but many big names are absent. All initial Japanese Ultra games are from NCL, which, when you think about it, isn't so bad. Under the NCL umbrella lies Rare, DMA Design, Hal, and Paradigm. The Ultra is in good hands and will retail for under \$250.00 as promised. The Ultra 64 debuts in Japan on April 21st, 1996, and about a month later in the US.



control pads. Moving on to the A and B action buttons, they're... basic A and B action buttons, 'nuff said. On the right hand side of the controller is a group of 4 smaller buttons, arranged in a SNES and PS style diamond configuration. Each of these buttons have a specific arrow indicator in them (up, down, left and right). Nintendo claims these buttons will be used mainly to change views, camera angles and stuff like that, but gee, since they're perfectly in line with the A and B buttons you could get away with using them for 6 button fighting games like... say... Kiz or SF3... but then I'm not one to gossip, so you didn't hear it from me!

On the rear of the Ultra controller there is a "Z" trigger button, perfectly placed to take advantage of the placement of your left index finger when you're using the analog stick. In SMB 64, you can use the Z button to slide or crawl.

Last, but certainly not least, is the Memory Pack located on the rear of the controller. At first, we thought this functioned like a PlayStation memory card (high scores, hidden characters, saved games and basic stuff like that). If what we hear is true, however, the Memory Pack could be just as revolutionary as the analog thumbpad, if not more so. According to a Japanese Nintendo 64 brochure, you can "save your own data such as game play and controller customizations. For instance, when you play a VS mode of a game, you can save fight information on each controller. This will help you analyze your friend's game play. For example, you can save how your friend controls his or her own car in your memory pack and you can challenge him/her by yourself." Now, I take this to mean that you can race all by yourself against a CPU car in... say... *Mario Kart R* but that car actually drives just like your friend you raced 5 months ago... Wow! Side note #4 (last one, I promise): The Japanese Nintendo 64 controller will be available in 7 different colors. One question... Why?

Now, although we can't judge the final effectiveness of the controller at this time (after all, Shoshinkai is the most complete game, and it's only 50% done), unlike other mags we won't "ride the fence" or "skirt the issue" by saying, "Hey, decide for yourself" or "We can't form an opinion at this time." From what we've played and heard, the controller feels unusual at first, but in time some found it intuitive, while others had visions of, dare I say, CD-I. It will be interesting to hear your reactions when the Ultra's released in April.





Nintendo president Hiroshi Yamauchi speaks out about Nintendo's vision of the future

Mr. Yamauchi's opening remarks included an introduction to the Nintendo 64 and then dealt with the mixed success of the new Virtual Boy system.

"Despite the lack of unique titles, we still thought it (Virtual Boy) could be sold. I want to return to the starting point and find titles that emphasize the difference that Virtual Boy games can provide. I want to start afresh in 1996."

Mr. Yamauchi recommended Nintendo to the development of unique software for this 3-D immersive system. He noted that several new titles were in the works for the Virtual Boy. In particular, he noted that several new titles were in development by an Osaka developer that showed some of the unique possibilities that Virtual Boy can deliver in a game.

"But I'm here to talk about the market and the Nintendo 64, not the Virtual Boy." Mr. Yamauchi went on to comment on the state of the video game market and how the Nintendo 64 will raise expectations. He explained that the reason for there being only two playable games at the show is that people are disappointed when they view incomplete games. He noted that *Super Mario 64* was 50% complete, but that players are already familiar with *Super Mario* games and therefore they can see the uniqueness and quality of this new Nintendo 64 title.

"I might be bragging, but when this game is complete, it may be the best video game in history. The launch of *Super Mario 64* with the Nintendo 64 will occur next April 21st." Mr. Yamauchi indicated that even though titles based on popular games such as *Nintendo Kart* are in development, fans of *Super Mario Kart* won't be able to see the uniqueness of the Nintendo 64 version of *Mario Kart* until it is at least 80% complete. He indicated that the game would be so fun and unique when it reached that point of completion, that it would help showcase the new video game system. "Clearly, when users who have been playing with Super Famicom *Mario Kart* can tell exactly how different the (Nintendo 64) title is, then the players would know for themselves what the features and characteristics of the Nintendo 64 are. And they will know just how different the Nintendo 64 is from other video game systems."

Mr. Yamauchi then asked, "What is the true nature of video games?" He feels that many people, including critics, miss the point of what makes a video game special. "The real value comes from playing high-quality, finished games."

Taking a moment to look back at the disastrous collapse of the video game market in the USA twelve years ago, Mr. Yamauchi pointed out the importance of satisfying customers with excellent titles. He noted that many developers stress the number of titles they make over the quality of their titles, hoping for a big hit. But Mr. Yamauchi feels that this is a recipe for disaster. "Users will just reject repetitious titles. They are sophisticated. They aren't fooled by copycat titles." He also pointed out that next generation hardware is meaningless without next generation games.

"The market should be led by software. But when you're talking about the next generation machine, you're talking about hardware. Users want software... creative, innovative software that offers a fun experience they have never witnessed before. This is a market that is led by software, so it doesn't make sense to talk about the so-called next generation machine."

In addition, he noted that many titles for new video game systems concentrate only on filling up memory with graphics and music while not adding to the game experience. He also mentioned that distributors should have greater expertise so that they don't put poor titles on retail shelves.

"Why did we launch the Nintendo 64? To defend and protect the video game market? For Nintendo to become the sole, absolute, hegemony in the market? No. We are launching the Nintendo 64 to rescue and save the market that is being threatened. Our objective is not to dominate the market. Rather, we want to change the market so that users won't leave us. We want to assure our future."

Mr. Yamauchi's vision of the Nintendo 64 controller enables new seeds or ideas to grow with developers. For example, the 3-D Stick can be used in sports games such as soccer and baseball for more realistic control. A qualitative difference can be felt by the users. Without those changes, there may not be a future for video games.

Next, Mr. Yamauchi touched on the benefits of cartridge-based games. "Many of you feel that CD-ROM is the call of the day. But look at the latest buzz word in the computer world—plug-and-play—which is nothing but Famicom culture. In addition, customers thought that having no loading time is a great advantage, but more importantly, by using ROM-based games, other chips can later be incorporated into the cartridge, which allows Nintendo to offer new game opportunities to game developers. The Nintendo 64 will carry on this tradition of using mask ROM and computer chips to provide the most advanced games."

Mr. Yamauchi also talked about plans for a bulk storage device for the Nintendo 64. "In addition to Mask ROMs, Nintendo intends to provide a large capacity, high-speed peripheral that not only reads data, but it writes it, as well. At next year's exposition, this new media should be introduced in video games, and hopefully, visitors can play with and see what this new media can provide." He emphasized that the read/write peripheral is not just for storing large amounts of data, but that it will allow the development of significantly new types of game play. He went on to list two potential projects that could make use of this new technology by the end of 1996—*Legend of Zelda* and *Dragon Quest VII*.

Mr. Yamauchi concluded his speech by inviting developers (who want to begin working with the Nintendo 64) to join him on Dec. 14 at NCL in Kyoto where issues of game quality and innovative design for the Nintendo 64 will be addressed. In addition to this, he stated that game cartridges for the Nintendo 64 would cost 9,800 yen, which is cheaper than some current Super Famicom titles. With 15 million Super Famicom/SNES systems in Japan, Nintendo will continue to support 16-bit gaming next year.



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