

Review: Nintendo Wii U blows up dual-screen gaming

November 16 2012, by Lou Kesten



In this June 7, 2012 publicity file photo provided by Nintendo, Pete Wentz, left, and guests get an exclusive preview of Nintendo's Wii U during E3 in Los Angeles. (AP Photo/Nintendo, Todd Williamson)

When Nintendo first broached the idea of multiple-screen video games

in 2004, many critics were skeptical that players could focus on two images at once. Yet the handheld DS, blending one touch-sensitive screen with a slightly larger video display, became a runaway hit.

Turns out the portable DS may have just been a dress rehearsal for Nintendo's latest home console, the [Wii U](#), which blows up the dual-screen concept to living-room size. It goes on sale in the U.S. on Sunday, starting at \$300.

The Wii U is the heir to the [Nintendo Wii](#) system, whose motion-based controls got [couch potatoes](#) around the world to burn calories as they swung virtual tennis rackets, bowled and flailed around in their living rooms. The new console still allows you to use your old "Wiimotes," but its major advancement is a new controller, the GamePad, with a built-in touch screen that measures 6.2 inches (15.7 centimeters) diagonally.

The GamePad looks like the spawn of a [tablet computer](#) and a classic [game controller](#). Its surface area is a little smaller than an [iPad](#)'s, but it's about three times as thick, largely because it has hand grips that make it more comfortable over prolonged game sessions. It has an [accelerometer](#) and gyroscope for motion-controlled games, as well as a camera, a microphone, speakers, two analog joysticks and a typical array of buttons.

It's the touch screen that really makes the difference. In some cases, it houses functions that are typically relegated to a game's pause screen. In others, it allows a group of people playing the same game together to have different experiences depending on the controller used. Nintendo Co. calls this "asymmetric gaming."

In the mini-game collection "Nintendo Land," you can shoot arrows or fling throwing stars by swiping on the touch screen. One of the games in the collection, "Mario Chase," uses the GamePad to provide a bird's-eye

view of a maze through which you can guide the hero. His pursuers—up to four players using Wiimotes—see the maze from a first-person perspective on the TV screen.

"New Super Mario Bros. U" brings the asymmetric approach to cooperative action. While Wiimote-wielding players scamper across its side-scrolling landscapes, the GamePad user can create "boost blocks" to help them reach otherwise inaccessible areas. If you're going solo, you can play the entire adventure on the GamePad screen, freeing up the TV for family members who might want to watch something else.

On a more basic level, the GamePad lets you select your next play or draw new routes for your receivers in Electronic Arts Inc.'s "Madden NFL 13." You use it to adjust strategy or substitute players in 2K Sports' "NBA 2K13."

Ubisoft's "ZombiU"—the best original game at launch—turns the GamePad into your "bug-out bag." It's where you'll find all your undead-fighting supplies, from bats and bullets to hammers and health kits. It lets you access maps and security-camera footage as you navigate the devastated streets of London. If you hold it vertically, you can scan the virtual space in three dimensions to locate zombies who are lying in wait.



In this June 5, 2012 file photo, an attendee plays a video game using Nintendo's Wii U controller at E3 2012 in Los Angeles. Nintendo unleashed 23 games for its upcoming console featuring a touchscreen controller at the Electronic Entertainment Expo, or E3, the gaming industry's annual trade show. (AP Photo/Jae C. Hong, File)

Essentially, the GamePad functions like the bottom half of the portable DS, with triggers, buttons and the [touch screen](#) offering additional information and an added dimension of control. In this comparison, your living-room TV would be the equivalent of the DS' top display.

It's somewhat gimmicky: Much of the time, you can easily imagine playing with just a regular joystick. But in "ZombiU," the GamePad adds to the atmosphere, creating the panicky feeling of scrambling around in a backpack while another undead horde approaches.

The high-definition graphics produced by the Wii U are close to those of

Microsoft Corp.'s Xbox 360 and Sony Corp.'s PlayStation 3. That should bring back some of the game makers who had fled the underpowered Wii—at least until Microsoft and Sony bring out their next-generation consoles (neither company has announced any plans yet).

Some fine games from the past couple of years—Warner Bros.' "Batman: Arkham City," Electronic Arts' "Mass Effect 3" and THQ Inc.'s "Darksiders II"—are finally coming to a Nintendo console. The enhanced GamePad controls don't substantially alter their DNA, and if you've already played them on the Xbox or PS3, you aren't missing much. But if I'd had the option to play them the first time around with the enhanced GamePad controls, I would have.

The Wii U's online functions include video chat, its own social network and the ability to search for TV shows and movies from services such as Netflix and Hulu. These are all free. I wasn't able to test those features before writing this review.

I don't expect the Wii U to make as big a splash as the original Wii did six years ago. Nintendo's competitors are dipping their toes into the dual-screen pool as well: Some Sony games link the PS3 with the handheld Vita, while Microsoft's SmartGlass app for tablet computers adds bonus material to Xbox games such as "Halo 4" and "Forza Horizon."

Still, the Wii U goes all in on the multiscreen concept for a relatively inexpensive price. And in a world where people tweet on their iPads while watching sports or reality shows on their TVs, the whole GamePad concept feels perfectly natural.

The Wii U's success will depend on what Nintendo and other developers do with that second screen. The early results are very promising.

About the Wii U:

The basic Wii U model, with 8 gigabytes of internal storage, costs \$300. The deluxe set, with 32 GB, "Nintendo Land" and a charging stand for the controller, costs \$350. It comes to the U.S. on Sunday, later this month in Europe and Dec. 8 in Japan.

Both versions come with the GamePad, but you'll need to snag old-school Wii controllers from older Wiis or buy them separately.

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