

# Review: Nintendo Wii U enhances experience with GamePad

November 25 2012, by Todd Martens

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Nintendo's Wii felt like a gaming revolution. Unlike its increasingly complex, button-riddled competitors, the Wii's controller was a magic wand. Simply stand and point, it seemed to be saying, and leave behind the burden of pressing a combination of Xs, Ys, squares and triangles. Since its 2006 release, it's estimated to have put a spell on nearly 100 million users worldwide.

In contrast, Nintendo's high-definition [Wii U](#) console (sure to be in short supply this [holiday season](#)) feels less otherworldly and more bound to existing technology.

The powerful system puts forth a valiant and ambitious solution to a [video game](#) quandary: How does a gaming console - that box tethered to

a television by one of those unsightly, old-timey cords - survive in an era dominated by the intimate touch screens of smartphones and tablets?

Simple: Join them.

The Wii U has traded the traditional controller for a [touch screen](#) that Nintendo has christened the GamePad. It's not sleek and sexy - think part iPad Mini, part child's first tablet - but it works wirelessly with the console's operating system.

The idea is that our individual screens shouldn't be stand-alone devices but should interact, so the GamePad now allows you to play the same game on its small screen and on your [TV screen](#) at the same time. And why would you want to do that? Because what you see on the GamePad as opposed to the TV isn't always the same, and that dynamic aspires to add a new dimension to gaming. But more on that later.

The GamePad also works as an entertainment hub: Tap it to turn up the volume on the TV, change the channel or, soon, browse Netflix. And, if your annoying roommate wants to watch "Honey Boo Boo" while you're engrossed in the "New Super Mario Bros. U," switch Mario and Co. to the GamePad - even while the game is in progress. Crisis solved. The game can then be played entirely on the GamePad, which for me worked just fine up to two rooms away from the base system.

All this makes the Wii U perhaps the most versatile gaming system ever invented. And today, amid the current cloud-driven digital revolution, convenience is power.

As for Wii U's drawbacks? Simply put, it's difficult to explain why a tablet that interacts with the TV is a necessary gaming advancement, and the initial Nintendo advertisements haven't exactly helped. They've highlighted the least impressive aspect of the Wii U - how it simplifies

karaoke - by heavily showcasing Nintendo's "Sing Party." It's nice that the person holding the GamePad can select songs with a swipe of the screen and then read the lyrics on the handheld display, but that's a minor perk of a system that runs \$299.99 or \$349.99, depending on the configuration.

It also lacks the surprise-like wonder of the Wii. When it was released six years ago, it felt space-age imaginative. The Wii had but one rule it needed players to understand: You, the person holding the controller, will stand up and wave your arm.

Perhaps not since the invention of a pinball machine had a piece of gaming equipment made so much sense. Soon, activities such as tennis and bowling suddenly found themselves needing added clarification. Did you actually go bowling, or were you Wii bowling?

Sports, as in get-off-the-couch-and-burn-calories sports, became virtual activities for the family. Video games, once again, were casual. The latter point was Nintendo's gift to the gaming world.

The Wii showed that video games were for everyone, and while Microsoft and Sony were emphasizing technically impressive systems with games that required a safe-cracking combo of buttons to master, the Wii illustrated the joy of the pick-up-and-play puzzle and the ease of a flick of the wrist.

Whereas the Wii arrived like a gift from the future, Wii U at first seems to be playing catch-up with a world where the screens that dominate our lives are not the ones found on a home television but the kind that can be carried with us. Why, even this newspaper article is likely being read on a screen, and though it's only been out since 2010, the iPad already has the potential to be a gamer's console of choice.

Yet Nintendo is on the forefront of multi-screen gaming, and one doesn't need to have the Wii U turned on long to see that the system is full of pleasantly unexpected surprises. For instance, it took all of 30 seconds for the system to sync with each of the two TVs it was attached to, and then - voila - the Wii U GamePad was a remote.

You can play your old Wii games on the system, but they won't come with the benefits of new games designed for the Wii U.

The Wii U edition of "Madden NFL 13" can be played using the GamePad to select - and even creatively draw - plays. The tablet's 6.2-inch LCD touch screen is bright and Pixar-crisp, and it often felt more natural to play a straightforward game like "[Super Mario Bros.](#)" or "Madden" entirely on the handheld device.

The GamePad enhanced every single launch game sampled. "Batman: Arkham City" has been out for more than a year on the Xbox 360 and PS3, but using the GamePad to read maps and tap among bat-gadgets made a tense, sprawling action game feel fuller and more inviting. And with the TV screen free of cluttering maps and inventory items, a game like "Arkham City" or a horror thriller such as "ZombiU" was instantly manageable.

The millions of current Wii owners will also be pleased to note that all Wii controllers and peripheral devices are immediately recognized by the Wii U, which is handy, considering the bundles now sold only come with one GamePad. (Nintendo will sell additional GamePads in the U.S. in 2013 for an as-yet-unannounced price, but expect it to be around \$150, based on prices in Japan.)

But Nintendo insists one GamePad is enough, even among four players (families prone to fighting over a remote were not part of the design equation). A game like "Luigi's Ghost Mansion" requires at least two

people and offers the GamePad user an alternate view of the action so they can sneak up on their prey - or hide from them.

Each of the 12 new games featured in "Nintendo Land," a title available with the \$349.99 system package or for \$59.99 alone, unveil a different use of the GamePad and are designed to showcase the uses of multi-screen gaming. In "Donkey Kong's Crash Course," blow into the microphone to push an avatar upward; in "Takamaru's Ninja Castle," turn the GamePad horizontally to fling weapons at enemies that look assembled of construction paper. Some, like "Captain Falcon's Twister Race," are deceptively easy and little more than games of perception.

These games are sometimes childish, but they reveal the system's aspirations that one hopes will be realized by Nintendo and third-party developers in the years to come. A gaming system will ultimately live and die by its games, and the Wii U offers enough at launch to feel optimistic about its marriage of tablet and TV.

Already, though, the Wii U does prove one point that all tech developers and game designers should heed: Smart devices are nice, but ones that connect are better.

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