

Console stars of Tokyo Game Show not on sale yet

September 19 2013, by Yuri Kageyama



Visitors gather around the booth of Sony Computer Entertainment during the Tokyo Game Show 2013 in Makuhari near Tokyo, Thursday, Sept. 19, 2013. More than 300 companies are taking part in the annual gala exhibition which opens to the public on Sept. 21-22. (AP Photo/Koji Sasahara)

The Tokyo Game Show this year has two big stars, Sony's PlayStation 4 and the Microsoft Xbox One, the first new home consoles to go on sale in seven years.

But neither console will be on sale in Japan until next year, far behind November releases in the U.S and Europe, and also the first time a new PlayStation console has not been released in Japan first.

Sony and Microsoft both say tailoring the machines for the Japanese market takes more time but many in the gaming world see the delay as symbolic of Japan's loss of its pioneering and leading role in the industry.

With eyes on a comeback, the show at the Makuhari Messe convention center in Chiba, outside Tokyo, has a renewed focus this year on independent game software developers.

The media got a preview of the show Thursday. Sony and Microsoft's booths are huge, with several playable versions of PS4 and Xbox One games, already drawing long lines. The show opens to the public over the weekend.

Game insiders and experts say that encouraging a new breed of game creators is crucial for Japan to regain its status in the game world, ceded over the years to the U.S. and Europe, where startups face fewer obstacles. They lament that the broader stagnation witnessed in Japan Inc. also infected the game world where big success was followed by complacency, and even a stifling of newcomers.

A presentation Thursday by Sony Corp. executives featured that same message. Flashed on a giant screen was the slogan made up of the words "PS," which stands for PlayStation, and "indies," with a big red heart mark in the middle.

Both Sony and Microsoft are eager to woo independent developers to the PS4 and Xbox One, and are making it easier to do so by sharing the consoles' technology with them.

"We are welcoming the contributions of independent developers," said Masayasu Ito, senior vice president at Sony Computer Entertainment, the Tokyo-based electronics and entertainment giant's game division.



In this taken photo Wednesday, Sept. 18, 2013, Japanese game producer Keiji Inafune speaks during an interview at his office in Tokyo. Inafune started his own game company Comcept three years ago after quitting Capcom, where he had had a lucrative nearly three-decade career. Taking his message for independence a step further, Inafune is now turning to crowd funding, or going directly to his fans around the world for money to work on his next major game, "Mighty No. 9," through Kickstarter, which allows the public to pledge cash online. He has already raised more than \$2.2 million, and is on his way to raise another million. (AP Photo/Shizuo Kambayashi)

Star game producer Keiji Inafune believes Japan must first recognize its failure before it can move on, as most have become too comfortable and

set in their ways, resting on the laurels of past success. Still worse, they have grown cautious, and churn out sequels of the old formulas, instead of taking risks, he said.

"Suddenly, Japanese games weren't selling, and they didn't look as good as they used to look, compared to foreign games," he told The Associated Press. "We need to first confront our own defeat, and we need to start learning from the world."

To show by example that he meant business, Inafune quit Capcom, where he had had a lucrative nearly three-decade career, rising to fame with hits such as "Mega Man" and "Dead Rising." His life up to then had been synonymous with Capcom's growth from a total unknown to a global company.



President and Group CEO of Sony Computer Entertainment Andrew House speaks at the Tokyo Game Show 2013 in Makuhari near Tokyo, Thursday, Sept. 19, 2013. More than 300 companies are taking part in the annual gala exhibition

which opens to the public on Sept. 21-22. (AP Photo/Koji Sasahara)

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Taking his message for independence a step further, Inafune is now turning to crowd funding, or going directly to his fans around the world for money to work on his next major game, "Mighty No. 9," through Kickstarter, which allows the public to pledge cash online.

He has already raised more than \$2.2 million, and is on his way to raise another million. The pledges are as low as \$5, although a \$20 minimum is needed to assure you a copy of the new game, and 1 million yen (\$10,000) gets you a private dinner date with Inafune himself.



Visitors take photos of Sony's PlayStation 4 on display during the Tokyo Game Show 2013 in Makuhari near Tokyo, Thursday, Sept. 19, 2013. More than 300 companies are taking part in the annual gala exhibition which opens to the public on Sept. 21-22. (AP Photo/Koji Sasahara)

Inafune says he is determined to show Japan is ready to reinvent itself.

"Japan is going to rise again to the top," he said at his Comcept office in Tokyo. "We have to go back to our roots and rediscover what made Japan great."

The Family Computer, or FamiCom, from Nintendo drew fans around the world during the 1980s, kicking off the heyday of Japan's game industry. The games developed for that machine and others that followed, such as Super Mario, Sonic the Hedgehog and Street Fighter, are still iconic franchises.

People around the world who grew up on those classics are part of the new generation of Western game developers, who have learned from and overtaken the Japanese, according to Inafune.



In this photo taken Wednesday, Sept. 18, 2013, Japanese game producer Keiji Inafune gestures during an interview at his office in Tokyo. Inafune started his own game company Comcept three years ago after quitting Capcom, where he had had a lucrative nearly three-decade career. Taking his message for independence a step further, Inafune is now turning to crowd funding, or going directly to his fans around the world for money to work on his next major game, "Mighty No. 9," through Kickstarter, which allows the public to pledge cash online. He has already raised more than \$2.2 million, and is on his way to raise another million. (AP Photo/Shizuo Kambayashi)

But they are also his fans, waiting for what Inafune and other daring Japanese may produce next, said Inafune, folding his arms across his chest like a fighter and appearing much younger than his 48 years.

Both Sony and Microsoft insist the Japan delay of their machines is to give more time for preparation.

The PlayStation 4, which goes on sale Nov. 15 in the U.S. and Canada, and Nov. 29 in Europe, goes on sale in Japan Feb. 22, 2014—the first time a major Sony console is not going on sale first in Japan. The PS4 will cost 39,980 yen (\$400) in Japan. It will cost \$399 in the U.S.



A visitor tries Sony's PlayStation 4 during the Tokyo Game Show 2013 in Makuhari near Tokyo, Thursday, Sept. 19, 2013. More than 300 companies are taking part in the annual gala exhibition which opens to the public on Sept. 21-22. (AP Photo/Koji Sasahara)

Microsoft Xbox One also isn't set to go on sale in Japan until next year although its global launch is set for Nov. 22. No date for the Japan sale is being announced. Microsoft Corp.'s machine costs \$499, but it comes bundled with a Kinect motion-controlled sensor.

Nintendo Co., which makes Pokemon and Super Mario games, started selling the Wii U console last November. Wii U sales totaled 3.61 million units so far. Nintendo is targeting sales of 9 million Wii U units over the fiscal year through March 2014.



A visitor tries Microsoft Xbox One during the Tokyo Game Show 2013 in Makuhari near Tokyo, Thursday, Sept. 19, 2013. More than 300 companies are taking part in the annual gala exhibition which opens to the public on Sept. 21-22. (AP Photo/Koji Sasahara)

The Kyoto-based company generally does not take part in the Tokyo Game Show and hasn't broken with tradition this year.

The company announced late Thursday that President Hiroshi Yamauchi, who engineered Nintendo's growth from a traditional playing-card maker into a global video game maker, died. He was 85. Yamauchi also became principal owner of the Seattle Mariners major league club in 1992, but sold it to Nintendo's U.S. unit in 2004.

Phil Spencer, corporate vice president at Microsoft Game Studios, says tailoring Xbox One for the Japanese market is taking more time, such as

making sure the voice recognition feature works and signing on partnerships for local content.



Models pose in front of an advertisement of Microsoft Xbox One during the Tokyo Game Show 2013 in Makuhari near Tokyo, Thursday, Sept. 19, 2013. More than 300 companies are taking part in the annual gala exhibition which opens to the public on Sept. 21-22. (AP Photo/Koji Sasahara)

But he denied the importance of Japan was diminishing for Microsoft, and stressed more software titles were in the works for Xbox One, including "D4" from star developer Hidetaka Suehiro.

Instead, he said the changes were more about a growing diversity in

types of games because they were being played on smartphones and tablets, as well as consoles.

"The creative capability here is without match," said Spencer.

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