

Nintendo's Wii U to launch Nov. 18, start at \$300

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Nintendo has a knack for changing the course of video games, appealing to the masses from kids to grandparents even if its technology isn't the most advanced.

The creator of "Mario Bros." and "Donkey Kong" said Thursday that it will launch its first high-definition gaming console on Nov. 18 in the U.S., later that month in Europe and on Dec. 8 in Japan.

It's the first major game console to launch in years. But Nintendo is merely catching up on HD with Sony Corp. and Microsoft Corp., which began selling their own HD consoles six and seven years ago, respectively. The question is whether a touch-screen tablet controller, coupled with TV-watching features, will be enough to surpass them.

The original Wii console revolutionized gaming and surpassed its rivals not because it had more power or better graphics, but because it gave people a new way to play. Its motion-sensing controller wasn't the most advanced, but it got people off the couch, swinging virtual tennis rackets, bowling and flailing around in living rooms around the world.

But over the years the novelty faded even as the Xbox 360 and the PlayStation 3 have managed to keep loyal, hardcore gamers enthused with massive shooters and multiplayer features.

Whether the Wii U can bring people back will depend on Nintendo's ability to lure people in with classic games from "Mario" to "Call of Duty," entertainment features that go beyond gaming and a price that doesn't break the bank.

Nintendo first announced plans for the Wii U last year, but it hadn't disclosed the price or availability date until Thursday.

The Wii U will start at \$300 for a basic model, which is just \$50 more than what the Wii initially sold for. For \$350, gamers can buy a deluxe version that is black instead of white. The deluxe model will also have a charging stand for its controller, 32 gigabytes of memory instead of 8 and "Nintendo Land," a smorgasbord of 12 popular Nintendo games.

Nintendo Co. has been trying to drum up excitement for the Wii U. What sets it apart from other consoles is the tablet-like Wii U GamePad. This controller allows for asymmetrical gameplay, so two or more people can play the same game but have different experiences. Players can also turn off the TV entirely and play on the GamePad, watching the game on the tablet's screen and using the controllers on the sides.

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In the "New Super Mario Bros. U," for example, players holding the old Wii controllers guide Mario, Luigi and other characters. The person with the GamePad can help them along by using a stylus on the tablet's touch screen to stun enemies or create stepping stones for the characters.

The new Mario game, which will be available when the Wii U launches, will also offer new challenges for advanced Mario players, such as trying to complete a level without touching the ground.

The Wii U GamePad will be included with each console. But the packages won't include the old-school Wii controllers, though they can be used to play the games. That's because Nintendo says there are enough of them out there, considering that nearly 97 million Wiis have been sold worldwide — compared with nearly 70 million Xbox 360s and about 64 million PlayStation 3s.

Sterne Agee analyst Arvind Bhatia said that the Wii U's technology doesn't make it a real, true "next generation" gaming console. He said it really matches the Xbox 360.

"But what has always helped Nintendo is the games they can put on it that nobody can," he added. "They don't necessarily need everything to be cutting-edge."

"Mario," "Pikmin" and other classic games have long been Nintendo's main draw.

Bhatia said sales expectations for the Wii U are fairly low, and Nintendo will be considered successful if the number of Wii Us it sell amounts to half the Wiis it sold.

That said, GameStop President Tony Bartel expects it to be a "really strong seller" this holiday season. Although a lot of gaming these days takes place on mobile devices, Bartel said "true immersive gaming is still owned by consoles."

Nintendo also announced new entertainment features for the console.

Called Nintendo TVii, the service collects all the ways users have to watch movies, TV shows and sports. So if you like the TV show "Modern Family," for example, it will pull in the show's episodes from every available source, whether that's on Hulu, Netflix or traditional cable TV.

The GamePad works as a fancy remote controller and will let viewers browse shows they can watch. Users will be able to select favorites and send them to other Wii users in their network as suggestions. In addition, families will be able to set up separate profiles, so that kids don't end up watching the drug-dealing drama "Breaking Bad," for example.

The service also captures scenes from live TV and displays them on the controller. Viewers can then comment on the scenes and share that on Twitter or Facebook if they want. With this feature, Nintendo is playing into what many people already do while they watch TV — comment and share things with friends using a second screen such as a smartphone.

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"Our goal is to disrupt the video space the way that Nintendo has historically disrupted the gaming space," said Reggie Fils-Aime, president and chief operating officer of Nintendo of America.

He added that the service "continues our mission of creating compelling entertainment experiences and doing it in surprising ways."

Pronounced "tee-veeee," TVii will be available Nov. 18 as well in the U.S. and Canada, at no extra cost. Nintendo didn't give plans for TVii in other countries.

Nintendo said more than 50 games will be available for Wii U by the end of March.

Among them will be Activision Blizzard Inc.'s "Call of Duty Black Ops II." The "Call of Duty" games have been holiday best-sellers for the past several years. But it's unlikely that hardcore gamers will flock to the Wii U just to play "Call of Duty," given the vast multiplayer gaming network that the Xbox 360 offers.

But Eric Hirshberg, CEO Activision Publishing, called it a big improvement for "Call of Duty" on Nintendo. Not a lot of people played it on the original Wii because it lacks realistic, high-definition graphics that has been one of the game's main draws on other machines.

As for Wii U, he added, it "makes games we tend to make much more legit."

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