

*Making Everyone Smile:
A Profile of Satoru Iwata*

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Over the course of his career, Satoru Iwata happily took on many different positions within Nintendo, but the reason as to why he will be loved among Nintendo fans and many members of the still young video game industry long after his passing is because he knew how to make both colleagues and players happy no matter his occupation. He was not a typical game developer or corporate president, but also a true lover of video games. A prominent theme in his life was whatever one does must be done with a smile so that it may spread to others. No matter how much a group of people is succeeding or failing, a positive attitude must come before all as that is what leads to productivity and most importantly forms strong relationships.

Iwata found the happiness of others to be his passion from childhood. He was born on December 6th, 1959 in Sapporo, Hokkaido, Japan. Long before he became president of Nintendo, Iwata was only a curious fan of electronic entertainment. He saved up to buy a HP-65, a calculator that could be programmed. He made a baseball game that only used the device's numbers. Making games brought him joy and watching his friends play them made him happy. The enthusiasm they shared made him say, "When I saw my friends playing that game and having fun, it made me feel proud. To me, this was a source of energy and passion." He loved the idea of making electronic games so much that he became a programmer for Japanese game development company HAL Laboratory-a subsidiary of Nintendo after receiving his computer science degree in 1982 from the Tokyo Institute of Technology. HAL made games during a time when doing so was a risk as the industry had only just begun in mid-1970's so developers like Iwata found their careers in an entirely organic way.

Joining HAL was the first of many risky decisions Iwata made, but it was his ticket to spreading his passion. Oversaturation of poor quality games that angry parents would return to

stores on the Atari 2600 lead the industry to crashing in 1983, less than a decade after its birth. These circumstances led Iwata to the harsh criticism he got from his disappointed father who would not talk to him for six months. Fortunately, Iwata's timing couldn't have been better as the Nintendo Entertainment System released in Japan also in 1983, and worldwide in 1985 reignited both developer creativity and consumer satisfaction with its games. HAL, with Iwata's help would take advantage of that.

Making great use of his natural creative talent and a desire to satisfy consumers, Iwata became one of the most revered developers within HAL and Nintendo. Like he previously was able to do with his calculator games, Iwata loved getting feedback from his peers on what he created. He enthusiastically participated in nearly every aspect of the company showing that passion leads to productivity as he said "[At HAL] I was a programmer. And an engineer. And a designer. And I marketed our games. I also ordered food. And I helped clean up. And it was all great fun." He was not just making games, but in a way running the whole company as he was involved with just about everything. A typical developer makes programs because it is their job, but ones like Iwata made fun and entertaining software for the player's sake.

Good video games provide players an environment that they can immerse themselves into. Simple actions such as jumping over a pit as Mario or defeating an enemy with a sword as Link can make players feel very rewarded, forming the positive reaction Iwata wanted players to have and share with others. Iwata was involved with the development of several Nintendo Entertainment System and Gameboy titles, one of which was *Kirby's Dream Land*. Kirby is a character happier than most others and is still HAL's most popular game series, selling to millions of players. Kirby may represent the positive atmosphere within HAL today partly in thanks to Iwata. Iwata was so respected that he later became the president of HAL Laboratory in

1992. He managed to save the company from bankruptcy despite having little proper experience as a manager. Great games and closing ties between the company and Nintendo were how he set HAL Laboratory up as one of today's most prominent development studios. In 2000 he moved to Nintendo's main headquarters and became their head of corporate planning while he still worked on games. He was able to run things well simply because he knew how to use games to satisfy consumers. All eyes at Nintendo were on Iwata, and soon developers started approaching the boss who they referred to as "Super Programmer Iwata."

There were many situations where Super Programmer Iwata helped save games that are still beloved today. Like a fan that wanted every release of a game to live up to their expectations, Iwata believed every game needed to be high quality and surprise players with new and creative mechanics. Where there was Iwata, there was relief. His career was rooted in making close connections with the other passionate developers he worked with. He came through when struggling developers were in trouble. HAL Laboratory's 1994 title *Earthbound* was at risk of having its development extended two years, but with Iwata's help it was reduced to one. In the process Iwata became close friends with *Earthbound's* creator Shigesato Itoi. Iwata was the sole programmer for 1999's *Super Smash Bros*. 2001's release of *Super Smash Bros Melee* was full of bugs and at risk of being delayed past the holidays. In three weeks, Iwata helped the game's overworked director Masahiro Sakurai remove all the game's big technical issues, furthering the bond they had formed since working on Kirby together. Other publishers may rush out an unfinished game without recruiting additional staff to get it out on time meaning that it will be quickly forgotten by players. 16 years later, the game is still being played in tournaments all over the world which shows how far the extra work Iwata put in went. That was the last title Iwata helped program before the biggest shift in his odyssey of a career occurred, and it fortunately

was one that gave him a major opportunity to capture the attention of many Nintendo developers and players.

Iwata's charisma and notoriety spread all the way up to Nintendo's then president, Hiroshi Yamauchi. The soon to be retired president was very hands-off during his presidency and not very involved with software development. Iwata believed that the very stern Yamauchi would fire him. Yamauchi decided Iwata would become his successor and assume his role as company president. He stated when discussing why he picked Iwata that, "The reason for Iwata-san's selection comes down to his knowledge and understanding of Nintendo's hardware and software." Iwata would take on his new position in 2002 and made very apparent changes, the biggest being Nintendo's own development atmosphere.

Just as he made the development environment at HAL one that was joyous, as president, his enthusiasm spread throughout all of Nintendo. Like a gathering of friends that came together to enjoy playing a game, Iwata did the same with the developers that made them. Even more productivity was made as many more developers were free from the stress they used to have. Employee satisfaction only sits at 46%, but Iwata was a walking human resource center. He made a comfortable environment as a colleague or mentor and encouraged employees to take risks themselves just as he did. He regularly conducted a series of interviews referred to as *Iwata Asks*, where he casually talked with numerous video game developers. Oftentimes, he would insert some of his own insight into game development, further building his approachable relationship with the colleagues he called friends. In an interview with the developers of *Splatoon*, Iwata conversed with them in a way that only a fellow developer would despite the game having been released 15 years after Iwata did any programming. He may have been president, but he still knew very well how Nintendo games were made. The interviews were not

just a means for Iwata to interact with developers, but also a way for those who read them online to learn of the passion and understanding he had for video games and form respect for him. The interviews posted on the *Iwata Asks* website were always accompanied by pictures of him and the developers laughing mixed in with looks of seriousness. Iwata was the engine and Nintendo developers were the rest of the pieces he used to build a rocket aimed towards success no matter the risk.

More than ever as president of Nintendo, Mr. Iwata was a risk taker, a man that happily sprung to every opportunity if it meant more player enjoyment. “We do not run from risk. We run to it,” he would say as his vision of Nintendo was to become the innovator of the industry rather than just another competitor. He wanted to expand the gaming audience by making games more approachable just as he did with himself as a boss so that families and friends can experience a similar atmosphere to the one he created. He had the courage to take risks, the wisdom of how to use games to surprise, and the power as president to make the important decisions he did. The new kinds of hardware Nintendo released from 2004 to present day reflect that vision. Having previously been a developer, Iwata saw how games and the hardware they ran on evolved over 20 years. Games had transitioned from 2D sprites used on the Nintendo Entertainment System to ones that used 3D models starting with the Nintendo 64 and beyond. Competitors Sony and Microsoft with their PlayStation and Xbox consoles have a continued focus on cutting edge power. As the visuals for games on those consoles have gotten even more realistic, Iwata was concerned that graphics would eventually reach its peak. To keep players interested and not get bored, more effort needed to be put into gameplay. “Someday our games won't look any better. What will we do then?...Some people put their money on the screen, but we decided to spend ours on the game experience.” Graphics may age, but a well-designed game

may be loved for generations as the new kinds of innovative hardware presented by Iwata proved.

The Nintendo DS and Wii systems released in 2004 and 2006 were the first consoles released under Iwata's leadership. They reflected the healthy state Iwata put the company in as the energetic atmosphere Iwata formed spread throughout Nintendo improved the company's creativity. Innovation and gameplay were put first as they touched a new generation of gamers. Every game Nintendo released during Iwata's presidency had his name in the credits as executive producer meaning that his influence was at the heart of the company. Whether it was a game out of this world for fans like *Super Mario Galaxy*, something for the sun saluting casual players like *Wii Fit*, or something completely fresh like *Splatoon*, Iwata encouraged the development of all sorts of games during his presidency so that players could find and share different ones they really liked. The systems went on to become Nintendo's most successful ever. Their success was not because of up to date graphics, but with new games utilized by the innovation of Nintendo DS's two screens and the Wii's motion remote both of which captured new audiences. Iwata put the company in a position that seemed unstoppable. The following generation Iwata still kept his head up when struggles arose.

The last few years of Iwata's life was when Nintendo employees appreciated his smile the most. Nintendo and Iwata himself began struggling. The Wii U console that released in 2012 was a commercial failure that sold a little more than a tenth of the Wii. Iwata faced harsh criticism from both players and investors because of the console's unclear target audience, poor advertisements, and software droughts. During the same generation in 2014, Iwata developed a cancerous tumor in his bile duct. It was surgically removed, but Iwata remained ill which prompted him to skip conventions and delay investor meetings. Fans began to worry. To them,

the more Iwata struggled, the more Nintendo did as well. During an investors meeting, Iwata was asked why he had not fired any employees yet. His response showed how willing he was to fight for his friends. In defense he said, "If we reduce the number of employees for better short-term financial results, however, employee morale will decrease, and I sincerely doubt employees who fear that they may be laid off will be able to develop software titles that could impress people around the world." To compensate for this, Iwata took a 50% pay cut for several months. Oftentimes in the business world, when a CEO leaves a company he may get millions of dollars as a separation bonus even if he left for doing malicious things. Iwata was not going to give up. His passion had not been lost at all. Because he remained confident in employees, Wii U received several critically acclaimed games throughout its relatively unnoticed life, many of which have found new fans today on more recent and successful systems.

The last few years of Iwata's life was when he personally made fans smile the most. Nintendo Direct video presentations which begun in 2011 and have continued to pop up regularly today were Iwata's means of communicating "directly" to the player. Happiness is a work ethic, one that Iwata built up for 30 years and wasn't going to let one failed product ruin. Iwata often presented his goofy and fun side when discussing new games. Jokes he made regarding Luigi and Donkey Kong bananas made him internet famous in the gaming community. He also shared insight on the process of making games. There would even be occasions when he would apologize for mistakes regarding things such as Wii U struggles and games being delayed. Nintendo Directs were how Iwata brought the atmosphere he created within Nintendo out into the public for everyone to notice as everyone interprets happiness the same way. He and everyone watching knew how much Nintendo was struggling at the time, but in Nintendo Directs, fans came to understand that despite the company's struggles Iwata was still as

passionate as ever. They however, didn't know Iwata was still struggling with his health so long after surgery.

Early 2015, only a few months before his death, Iwata made his final major announcement that made players hopeful. Nintendo was working on another console despite many suggesting they just give up and make games for other platforms. During the Wii U generation, Iwata tried to figure out the switch up that the company needed to surprise players again. No one would know what the system was until the following year. Smiling is supposed to keep one healthy, but as much as Iwata did, it wasn't enough. On July 11, 2015 he passed way at age 55 due to the tumor returning. Never did the entire video game industry and fans seem so down.

For a moment, competitors stopped smiling. Head of Xbox Phil Spencer who has since been very friendly with Nintendo said "Sad day for Iwata-san's family, friends, and gamers everywhere. His passion, creativity & leadership elevated our industry." President of Sony Computer Entertainment Shuhei Yoshida, a person that understands video games as an art said, "He was an inspiration as a leader of one of the most influential companies in the game industry, who used to make games himself and has always been a gamer." Fans from all the consoles saw their responses, many recognizing what happened was bigger than a competition.

For a moment, fans around the world stopped smiling. Fan artwork was everywhere, especially on Nintendo's then social media platform Miiverse. Every article written about Iwata's passion was full of heartfelt comments. Nintendo's own confirmation of his death on twitter was met with an overwhelming response of emotion. Iwata had become someone they were always happy to check in on when a Nintendo Direct came by, a source of happiness now gone.

For a moment, developers at Nintendo stopped smiling and mourned the loss of their friend. Shigesato Itoi, who saw Iwata fit his massive game *Earthbound* onto a small cartridge said “You always put yourself second to others no matter what, helping anyone who needed it whenever they needed it. You were that kind of friend. Although you may have been a little selfish for the first time ever by taking this journey.” The person that Iwata worked with from nearly the beginning on *Kirby* and *Super Smash Bros*, Masahiro Sakurai said “Mr. Iwata’s world is gone, leaving a massive impression on those around him. Yet, even so, our world continues. I will not mourn or fall into depression. I will continue to do my work as best as I can. All I can offer is that I complete that which I have to do.” Maybe Iwata is the reason why Sakurai has pushed himself to make *Super Smash Bros* games today despite the toll they take on him, forever wanting to carry on his legacy and a big part of his world.

Smiling is Iwata’s legacy. At the 2005 Global Developers Conference he said, “On my business card, I am a corporate president. In my mind, I am a game developer. But in my heart, I am a gamer.” A gamer is someone that seeks happiness individually in an interactive world so that he can share what he discovered with others just as Iwata did as he made them. The fun times gamers had while playing games Iwata and many other developers made has led to relationships that may have otherwise not occurred. Pokémon for example encourages interaction with other players outside and at conventions. Iwata knew that video games were not an activity that segregated. Anyone can enjoy playing with anyone. A group of friends, a family, or even complete strangers all can enjoy being together and playing a game. People have formed lifelong friendships simply because of talking about games and other things they love. Not everyone is a gamer, but everyone can have the spirit of one through whatever they do.

The video game industry is still growing, and Satoru Iwata was a big reason why it has been so successful. The mystery system that Iwata revealed shortly before he passed turned out to be the console-portable hybrid Nintendo Switch which released in 2017. It's a system that fully embodies what Iwata wanted most, fun with anyone anywhere. It represents both a recovery and a new beginning for a Nintendo without Iwata and has become the fastest selling system in the US of all time. The system's universally loved launch title *The Legend of Zelda Breath of the Wild* was the last new game to include Iwata's name in the credits, but just one of many that have carried on his influence. That game and others made by Nintendo since have paid tribute to Iwata's accomplishments with hidden references to his likeness all of which signified his impact. With his immense passion and love for video games that everyone could enjoy, Iwata succeeded in making more people around the world smile. To Satoru Iwata, "above all, video games are meant to just be one thing: Fun for everyone." Today, Nintendo's slogan within is "making people smile." This should be the slogan for many no matter what they are doing.

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