The Switch is Nintendo’s best-selling console — and its most transformative



Nintendo has had plenty of highs over its few decades in the video game industry. Popularizing home consoles with the NES, introducing new audiences to games through the Wii’s motion controls, and the touchscreen Trojan horse that was the Nintendo DS, to name a few. But often these successes were followed by missteps; the Wii sold 100 million units, while its follow-up, the Wii U, couldn’t even manage a quarter of that. But that precarity looks to change. The Switch is now Nintendo’s best-selling console ever, surpassing the DS with 155 million units sold since its debut in 2017. And over that span Nintendo has transformed itself into a company better insulated against the ever-changing whims of the games industry.

One of the key factors behind the Switch's success was how it represented a more unified version of Nintendo. In 2013, the company merged its two main game development divisions, which had previously been split into home console and handheld groups. Given how the Switch straddled the line between console and handheld, this made a lot of sense. But it also allowed Nintendo to put the full might of its creative resources behind a single platform. The result was a string of massive hits: games like *Mario Kart 8 Deluxe*, *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*, *Super Smash Bros. Ultimate*, *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*, and *Super Mario Odyssey* all sold upward of 30 million copies.

Just as important, this structure allowed Nintendo to release big games consistently over the Switch's lifespan. Even as the focus shifted to the next console, the Switch's final years still included brand-new *Zelda* and *Super Mario* games. The structure has also allowed Nintendo to seamlessly continue this success into the launch of the Switch 2, which got off to a very fast start and debuted alongside a brand-new *Mario Kart*, which was followed by *Donkey Kong* and *Metroid*.

But outside of games, which form the core of the company, Nintendo has also used the Switch's success to steadily branch out in new directions. In 2023, *The Super Mario Bros. Movie* hit theaters, earned more than $1 billion, and now Nintendo has both a sequel and a live-action *Zelda* movie on the way. Nintendo opened its first theme park in Japan in 2021, and has since expanded to Hollywood and Florida, with a location in Singapore due up next. The company even opened its own museum in 2024. In essence, Nintendo is building an entertainment empire. Its competition is increasingly the likes of Disney and Netflix in addition to Xbox and PlayStation. "I think people view Nintendo as a gaming company," Shinya Takahashi, Nintendo's senior managing executive officer, told me in 2023. "But we have always thought of ourselves as an entertainment company."

It’s not a completely unique strategy: Just about every video game company is hoping to break out in film and television after the success of projects like *The Last of Us*, *Fallout*, and *A Minecraft Movie*. But in Nintendo’s case, the company seems to understand just how precarious a success like the Switch can be, and it used that success to steadily build itself up into something bigger in a deliberate, concerted way. It’s something Nintendo has tried to do before — see: the company’s ill-fated efforts into mobile gaming — but its resurgence during the Switch era allowed it to approach these ventures with a new level of focus and ambition. This is a company that’s so confident it’s about to release a $100 re-creation of the Virtual Boy, one of its greatest failures.

But the new Switch also doesn’t need to match its predecessor’s success — it just needs to allow Nintendo to keep this momentum going.

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