

THE “FATHER” OF THE NINTENDO ENTERTAINMENT SYSTEM IN SLOVAKIA FOR THE FIRST TIME

Interview with Masayuki UEMURA

Zdenko Mago (Z. M.): Profesor Uemura, how did you realize that working in the digital gaming industry would be the best choice for you? Which were the major factors that influenced your decision?

Masayuki Uemura: When I started working for Nintendo, it could hardly be said that there was a gaming industry. No such thing as a gaming industry existed then, so it cannot be said that I would decide on the basis of wanting to work for the gaming industry. At that time, Nintendo was considered to be a toy company, and when I received this job offer I imagined that I would earn money and do an interesting job – inventing new things. But when I entered this career I found out that it was really difficult to earn money and invent interesting things.

At that time, the video game industry began to expand in America and that is why I decided to work for Nintendo. But even today, I consider Nintendo to be only one of companies in the gaming industry. I do not consider it to be a company that would represent this industry.

Z. M.: When I was young, we used to call any gaming console available in our country at that time “Nintendo”. What do you think about the fact that people consider you as the founder of Nintendo?

Masayuki Uemura: I am really honoured that people in Slovakia called all game consoles “Nintendo”. I am delighted about this particularly because of the fact that I can know how the world of games is perceived in Japan. But what I find really interesting, is how it is perceived by people abroad as well as in Slovakia. If I had not been invited to this conference I would never have learnt this kind of information that people are telling me. So, this is really beneficial for me from a research point of view as well.

Z. M.: Together with your team you created many iconic games. Why did you decide to create a separate game for Mario who was originally just a character in the game Donkey Kong? Did you feel even then that he could become one of the most famous characters in the digital-gaming world?

Masayuki Uemura: Unfortunately, I was not personally involved in the development of Mario or Donkey Kong because they were evolving at different times, but I can tell you the words of Mr. Miyamoto who was involved in the development of both these games: Donkey Kong is a game created out of the boredom of people contributing to the development, and eventually creating a final product. If game developers do not feel that “this is interesting”, “this should be further developed”, “this should be worked on”, then it is hard to develop something. It is inevitable to have an idea. There were also situations that Nintendo was introduced to ideas by people from outside which Nintendo implemented, and one such idea was Donkey Kong.

When Mr. Miyamoto was developing Donkey Kong, one of the things he applied in the game was jumping – because children like jumping. When he was a child he liked jumping, too. And that is why he tried to implement it into the game. So, then we all, the employees, thought about this idea and later, Super Mario was invented based on this idea of jumping in the game.

Z. M.: Is there a particular piece of work or character you created for Nintendo of which you are most proud?

Masayuki Uemura: Rather than being proud of something specific, I wonder what has been achieved in Nintendo in general such as NES, Famicom and so on. So, these are the things I think about in general. Nintendo, of course, has significantly evolved from its beginning until the present. But when I come back to the original design from where the initial ideas for the original video games were born, that is probably what I am most proud of – that even now people still like it.

Z. M.: I know that you occasionally work for Nintendo as a consultant. On which of Nintendo’s recent projects have you consulted?

Masayuki Uemura: I officially terminated my employment last year, on March 31. However, even today, Nintendo developers still look to me to ask for advice. I signed a contract of discretion, so even though I can talk to Nintendo employees, I can answer their questions, I can express my point of view but, of course, I am not allowed to discuss these issues in public.

Z. M.: After you retired from Nintendo, why did you decide to enter and work in the academic world?

Masayuki Uemura: Originally, I did not think of nor did I have the ambition to work at university but I was attracted to research. Ritsumeikan University was about to open a new study programme for games and video games and I was approached and asked whether I would like to participate in this research and contribute to it. As I like challenges and new things I said to myself I would try.

Z. M.: Which areas of game research are you dealing with at the Ritsumeikan Centre for Game Studies?

Masayuki Uemura: Our research centre works by bringing together several teachers, several professors and exchanging views and insights into things. Mr. Inaba, who is here

with me, is also a member of this centre. We are also committed to creating a database of games and related affairs, and also the state supports the centre in these activities.

Z. M.: How many games does the Ritsumeikan Center archive contain at the moment? Could you describe the game archiving process?

Masayuki Uemura: It will be several thousands of games. We have a database consisting of games that have been created outside of Japan because, of course, not all of them are in Japan. Most of the games are in the USA in The National Museum of Play and at The University of New York, also in Germany at Leipzig University and in the UK. This year or in 2018, all these databases are planned to be linked and it will be possible to search for information about the games also on the Internet.

Z. M.: Do you consider digital games as cultural heritage?

Masayuki Uemura: I would wish that.

Masayuki Uemura

Since 1972, he has worked for the Nintendo Company on solar cell technology for the Laser Clay System Shooting project (simulation of shooting with a light weapon developed by Nintendo in 1973) and Beam Gun SP project. Due to the growing demand for development, he was in charge of the management of the Research & Development 2 Division in which they worked on the development of several hardware devices such as games for colour televisions, Nintendo Family Computer (Famicom), Nintendo Entertainment System (NES), Super Nintendo Entertainment System or BS-X Satellaview. Uemura and his group were responsible for a wide range of hardware and software projects (Donkey Kong, Mario Bros). Since 2004 he has been formally retired but he is still acting as a consultant for Nintendo.



Within academia, he acts as a professor at Ritsumeikan University (College of Image Arts and Sciences / Department of Image Arts and Sciences; Graduate School of Core Ethics and Frontier Sciences) in Kyoto, Japan, with a focus on digital games and gaming studies. At the same time, he is acting as a director of the Ritsumeikan Centre for Game Studies, which was founded as part of Ritsumeikan University The Kinugasa Research Organization Institute in April 2011. The centre conducts specialized and comprehensive research in a wide range of games and gaming, from traditional toys and game equipment to games using the latest technology.

Professor Masayuki Uemura holds the Special Achievement Award from the Japan Media Arts Festival 2015 and on April 25, 2017, he was awarded Doctor Honoris Causa by the University of Ss. Cyril and Methodius in Trnava, Slovakia.

