Early Video Game Consoles

The early history of video game consoles in North America is fascinating. The video game console market quickly grew from nothing to a giant boom phase. Soon afterwards, however, it was imperiled by a mixture of hubris and bad ideas. Fortunately, for gaming aficionados, the industry was rescued by an obscure company based in Japan.

The console boom started in 1980 when Atari released the “Atari 2600” game console. Atari had a brilliant gimmick for its sales campaign. It included a free copy of the game “Space Invaders” with every Atari 2600. Space Invaders was extremely popular at arcades at this time so consumers were excited to be able to play it in their homes. As a result, Atari 2600 sales skyrocketed. Other companies jumped in to the video game console market and produced their own consoles for sale. Home computers such as the Commodore and the Apple series were also becoming popular because they could play games and use other kinds of software. Video game consoles and personal computers were in nearly every North American home in the early 1980s. Although the market for video games had reached the saturation point, many companies ignored this reality and kept manufacturing consoles and new games at breakneck speed. A collapse was imminent.

The failure of many companies to recognize the realities of an overcrowded market is exemplified by the story of Atari’s “E.T.” video game, based on the hit movie of the same name. Without devoting adequate time to develop and test the game, E.T. was rushed to market for Christmas in 1982. Atari executives were so confident of the game’s consumer appeal that they manufactured millions of E.T. games and Atari 2600s to sell for Christmas. Not only did the game fail to spur the sale of new Atari 2600 consoles, but it was poorly received by fans. For months, E.T. sat unsold on store shelves. There were so many unsold E.T. games that Atari was forced to bury millions of the cartridges in the New Mexico desert. The E.T. fiasco nearly sunk Atari financially. It showed everyone that there was no more money to be made in selling video game consoles. By 1984, no companies in North America were making them.

Just as the video game console market in North America seemed to be dying, an unlikely savior appeared. In 1983, a Japanese company called Nintendo released the Family Computer (or Famicom) in Japan. Famicom games were longer than any North American games and had superior graphics than most other consoles at the time. Nintendo started selling the Famicom console in North America, where it was dubbed the “Nintendo Entertainment System” (or NES) in 1985. Nintendo sold the NES with a Super Mario Brothers game and a light gun (the Zapper). Super Mario Brothers was a massive hit with North Americans, and it prompted them to buy video game consoles again. In just two years, Nintendo had revived the North American video game market after most domestic companies had given up on it.
1. According to the article, when did the expansion in video console sales begin?
   a) after Atari released a game console with an ingenious twist
   b) it started in 1980 when Apple released a game console
   c) when Commodore released its first home computer
   d) in the early 1980s when the market became overcrowded

2. According to the article, what happened to sales of Atari’s 2600 after they gave away a free copy of the game “Space Invaders”?
   a) they came through in the end
   b) they went through the roof
   c) they followed through to the end
   d) they sailed through without a problem

3. According to the article, what happened to the market for video games by the early 1980s?
   a) all the new games on the market were incredibly fast
   b) the market had reached a stage where not many more consoles could be sold
   c) there was an increasing demand for more sophisticated video game consoles
   d) there were an incredible range of new video games coming onto the market

4. The word “breakneck” in paragraph 2 could be replaced with:
   a) brief
   b) excessive
   c) painful
   d) inconsiderate

5. The word “imminent” in paragraph 2 could be replaced with:
   a) inevitable
   b) escapable
   c) immaculate
   d) dangerous

6. The word “spur” in paragraph 3 could be replaced with:
   a) stipulate
   b) repress
   c) spurn
   d) stimulate

7. The word “them” in paragraph 3 refers to:
   a) companies
   b) cartridges
   c) E.T. games
   d) video game consoles
8. According to the article, what did the failure of Atari’s E.T. video game reveal about the video game industry?
   a) the video game market was oversaturated
   b) video game technology was limited
   c) the movie “E.T.” was not very popular
   d) overseas games were better than U.S. games

9. The word “superior” in paragraph 4 could be replaced with:
   a) higher-frequency
   b) higher-density
   c) higher-calibre
   d) higher-intensity

10. According to the article, when did the Nintendo Entertainment System reach North American store shelves?
    a) 1982
    b) 1983
    c) 1984
    d) 1985

11. The word “revived” in paragraph 4 could be replaced with:
    a) rejuvenated
    b) readopted
    c) redirected
    d) reelected

12. The word “it” in paragraph 4 refers to:
    a) Nintendo
    b) Super Mario Brothers
    c) the video game market
    d) domestic company

13. What would be a good title for this passage?
    a) The Rise and Fall of Game Consoles in North America
    b) The Disastrous Release of E.T. for the Atari 2600
    c) Superior Japanese Video Gaming Technology
    d) How Video Game Consoles Changed North America

14. What would you predict as the topic for the next paragraph?
    a) a description of how the Zapper light gun worked
    b) why the sales of the Famicon in Japan increased
    c) how other companies started making consoles again
    d) a description of the video games made by Nintendo