



■ 'Twas the night before Christmas and it certainly wasn't quiet, when is it ever on Christmas eve?!

There was a great deal of excitement for the new entertainment system to be unwrapped tomorrow! Yes — kids, young and old, up and down the land were hoping for a new console or computer. Sure, they had one already, but this new one would be faster, better graphics, new features and altogether more awesome! And of course, it had to come with new games, since it would be incompatible with the old ones!

This is a story that plays out in many hundreds of thousands of households every year and has done for the last 30+ years. Christmas has always been a great time for the games industry, but what has that meant for the game developers?

Over the years, getting games ready for the Christmas market has changed a lot

depending on the technology and the era. And how about Santa — how much does he feature when it comes to video games? We see Santa being heavily used in other industries, and often in films and TV shows. So how about in games, he's a free license after-all, albeit for young kids.

Games of Christmas Past

In the 80s games were sold on cassette or disk. They always took under a year to make so, typically the idea of doing a game for Christmas, meant designing something in the height of summer. It would be essential that the game was manufactured and on the shelves around the last week of November. Shops really weren't keen to take them any earlier. Since the production of cassettes and disks was quite short, around a month, it meant the game had to be wrapped up and mastered by the middle of October but could slip to the end of October if needed. All being well, the game was in the shops for the whole of December up to

Christmas.

If a game was based on a Christmas theme, say for example, it starred Santa, then it was very important that all the stock sold during the first 3 weeks of December, and there would be some heavy discounting for anything left on the shelf by Christmas Eve. Having any stock after Christmas was a disaster and one of the main reasons why producing games based on Santa was quite a high-risk strategy. The earliest example of a Christmas only game was Santa's Sleigh Ride for Apple II released in 1981, developed and published by Energy Games.

In 1984 Creative Sparks released Special Delivery: Santa's Christmas Chaos for the Spectrum, Atari 8-bit & C64, whilst Icon software released Merry Xmas Santa for the BBC-B, Electron and Spectrum. Five years later, Alternative Software released The Official Father Christmas, for Spectrum, C64 & Amstrad. We're not sure what made it 'official' — did they sign a rights deal with Santa himself? The following year Zeppelin

Games produced Santa's Xmas Caper for Spectrum, Amstrad and C64. All the games so far were very low quality — Santa was not building up a good reputation in games!

Console Crazy 90s

By the 90s it was the era of cartridge based consoles. This meant that the production schedules doubled. Cartridge production and distribution time went up three to four fold!

Game developers had to start games over a year out. It did mean whilst the weather was cold and wintery, and Christmas trees and lights were going up, developers could be concepting and doing the initial work on their Santa based games. The console business was very much a global business, and that meant attending the console trade fair — CES (Consumer Electronics Show) in Las Vegas, in the first week of January, if you wanted to pitch for funding. So the Christmas holidays were often crunch time of preparing demos and pitches for CES.

Most cartridges were produced in the far east and shipped to Europe and America. This meant games had to be mastered by July, or August at the latest, if they were to make it into shops for late November. Since holiday season starts earlier with Thanksgiving in the US, all Christmas season games were expected to be in the shops by early November.

This gap between ordering the cartridges and them hitting reviewers and shops meant publishers were guessing at

Santas Sleigh Ride

Apple II — 1981

Publisher: Energy Games

Control Santa's sleigh, led by Rudolph the Laser-Nosed Reindeer. Move the sleigh up and down to shoot deadly birds and stars scrolling from the left. A bizarre first outing for Santa that thankfully most of you are too young to have seen.

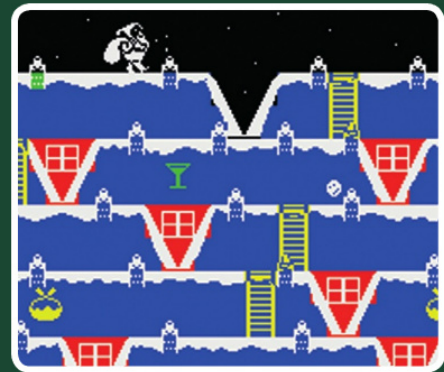


Merry Xmas Santa

BBC B, Electron, Spectrum — 1984

Publisher: Icon Software

Santa must visit all chimneys in this 2D platform game, whilst avoiding flying sad faces and falling icicles. A reasonable approach given the limitations of the platforms — but flying sad faces?



Special Delivery : Santa's Christmas Chaos

Atari 8-bit, C64 & Spectrum — 1984

Publisher: Creative Sparks

Collect presents dropped by angels in Santa's Sleigh, whilst avoiding those from red devils and then climb down chimneys to leave them presents under the Christmas tree without being caught by the occupants.



The Official Father Christmas

Spectrum, Amstrad & C64 – 1989

Publisher: Alternative Software

It's Christmas eve and you start by finding pieces of the Sleigh to assemble in a flip-screen adventure with very unhelpful elves. Following this you must collect a bunch of presents and then deliver, well drop, them to countries from your sleigh.



manufacturing quantities of very expensive inventory! If you thought producing cassettes and discs for Christmas was high risk – the stakes just got a lot bigger. But Sunsoft thought they'd risk it, and Daze Before Christmas was released in 1994 for MegaDrive and SNES but was only in Australia after they got cold feet releasing elsewhere! Bizarre they should release it in Australia really as it featured lovely snow scenes in the height of the Australian summer!

Philips released an Interactive book for their ill fated CDi console called Santa Claus' Mice. But it must be concluded it wasn't successful, since nothing on CDi was!

The highlight Christmas game was Xmas Lemmings from DMA Design & Psygnosis in 1993. Those Lemmings with Santa hats were adorable.

The second half of the 90s saw the introduction of the better CD-based consoles, ushering in reduced manufacturing times, and fast turn around on re-ordering. This meant publishers could place their 'more reserved' orders in October and should initial sales spike they could reorder stock within a week. However, Sony and Sega were very controlling as to what games would be given approval for development and production for their consoles. Thankfully, they weren't about to approve any Santa based games.

As gamers were turning to the PC, Santa Slayer was released – a first person shooter, not one for the kids, or for anyone that looked for quality in their games!

Santa's Xmas Caper

Spectrum, Amstrad & C64 / Amiga & DOS – 1991

Publisher: Zeppelin Games

On the 8-bit computers Santa is in his sleigh in a side scrolling shooter! Yes pixies are out to stop him with bombs, so Santa must fight back with children's gifts! The 16-bit versions a year later had Santa negotiating levels and picking up gifts.



Xmas Lemmings

Amiga & PC – 1993

Publisher: Psygnosis

Lemmings falling to their death again, but this time it's Christmas which makes it so much funnier! Gotta love the little fellows – especially when they put on their Santa hats. Easily the most charming Christmas game.



A New Millennium

Into the new millennium and Microsoft joins the console race and SEGA is pushed back to being a games publisher without its own console, after the failure of the Dreamcast.

Game development times and budgets increase and nobody is about to do any games based on Santa for the TV based consoles!

But this was the time of the Gameboy and more importantly Gameboy Advance. Smaller cheaper games could be produced on these, but they still had long and expensive inventory issues, but that didn't stop Telegames putting out Santa Claus saves the Earth on Gameboy Advance — they even doubled down and produced it on the PlayStation 1!

The other big games development that occurred in the new millennium was that many families had a PC with Windows, for internet browsing and email and now this was being targeted by developers and publishers largely for 'edutainment' games — child-friendly games promising to entertain and educate. The great things about the PC was that CDs were getting quick and cheap to produce. The first was Santa Claus in Trouble by CDV, which was a simple 3D arcade game in 2002 — this would have been fairly expensive to produce. Better still was the multimedia style 2D games for kids, these could be developed and produced quickly, cheaply and sold in volume in supermarkets.

Daze before Christmas

MegaDrive, Genesis & SNES — 1994

Publisher: Sunsoft

The cold and evil snowman has spooked all the elves away, and the Timekeeper has stolen Santa's plans from his house. There won't be any Christmas if Santa doesn't stop them in this side scrolling platform game.



Santa Slayer

Windows — 1996

Publisher: Digital Dialect

First Person trigger happy Santa finds he's not alone and sets out to kill the Santa imposters and elves. Two hand guns and as well as an unlimited supply of guided and unguided missiles should be enough — except they are equally well armed!



Santa Claus Junior

Gameboy Color — 2001

Publisher: Neon Developments

A 2D side on scroller where you play Nick whose job is to find all presents Santa Claus lost when the evil witch caught him. Defeat the witch and free Santa Claus to save Christmas.



Santa Claus in Trouble

Windows — 2002

Publisher: CDV

Software

A 3D run and jump game that sees Santa collecting and delivering presents across snowy rooftops with Christmas music. Review: Nothing crazy here — just good solid collecting and distributing presents, with some strange crates to make it trickier.



Santa Claus Saves the Earth

PlayStation and Gameboy Advance — 2002

Publisher: Telesoft

A 2D platform game sees evil fairy Nilam use her magic pot to send Santa Claus into an Enchanted Land. With only a few hours until Christmas, Santa Claus must travel through the lands and stop Nilam in order to save Christmas.



We wish you a Merry Christmas

Wii — 2009

Publisher: Panic Button

13 Mini holiday-themed games and activities for the whole family. Review: 13 — Unlucky for some well for those who got this for Christmas!



Examples of these were Santa Ride, Christmas Tale, Santa Balls, Christmas Crisis, Christmasville, Christmas Quest 1, 2 & 3 and many others.

Nintendo launched the massively successful Wii in 2006 which created a huge casual market for Wii games. Nintendo relaxed its concept approvals so someone had to create a Santa game and that was Destineer with We Wish You a Merry Christmas followed a year later in 2011 by Red Wagon Games' Santa Claus is Comin' to Town.

From 2010 onwards there was an explosion of ways to create and distribute games quickly and cheaply. Whether online browser games, social games inside Facebook, download games from digital store, for PC, consoles & of course smart phones and pads.

There are now so many, it's too many to list them all, but here's a few — Santa Run (Windows), Santa Factory (WiiU), Flight Before Christmas (X360), Santa's Magic Sack (iOS & Android), Santa's Workshop (Windows), Sukura Santa (Windows), Santa's Warehouse Sokoban (Browser, iOS & Android), Secret Santa (Windows), Long Live Santa! (Windows)

And there are many more but I think we can leave it there.

Games of Christmas Present

This Christmas sees Google enter the games arena with its streaming service — Stadia. Cool name, cool concept. It's exceptionally ambitious, with

the promise that players can browse many AAA games that you can fire up in seconds. Sounds fantastic, and provided players have great internet speed then it seems like a fantastic future for games. However, it's bound to have many issues for many people, so it may take quite some time before everyone has the option of this or other game streaming services.

Fewer players will be upgrading their consoles this Christmas as players have to wait for next years new offerings from Sony, Microsoft and maybe even Nintendo.

So as Christmas approaches and the festivities begin, should we be looking forward to seeing Santa starring in games this Christmas?

I think we can all conclude – 'Let's hope not!'. Sadly, it would appear that the resounding evidence above suggests that even though he's a massive part of Christmas in the real world, we don't need him in the virtual world, certainly not in our games!

Games of Christmas Future

Well the games just keep getting better! As kids, we dreamt of the holodeck, and as every year passes we get a step closer. Just think of when VR/AR glasses come to escape rooms! We see this coming, but it'll probably take a few more years before they are common place.

As for Santa, can we expect him to appear in better games in the future? We think he'll always be a gimmick to sell

Santa Claus is Comin' to Town

Wii - 2011

Publisher: Red Wagon Games

Play as Kris Kringle with optional Topper the Penguin as a second player, collecting magic snowflakes, letters from children. Make and deliver toys and lots more on the path to becoming Santa Claus!



Santa Factory

WiiU - 2015

Publisher: XINESS Co

Play as Tonttu and Rudolf as they help Santa find presents with the aid of a magic wand to draw objects to help them overcome obstacles. Includes teaching over 100 English words.



digitally distributed games at Christmas time, especially to kids, so expect to see a lot more. Will they be better? Well, the bar is very low, so surely some must be!

Sooner or later, someone will produce the VR games where you can be Santa delivering presents!

And so with all that said and done, we wish you all an Eggcellent Christmas & Wonderful New Year.

