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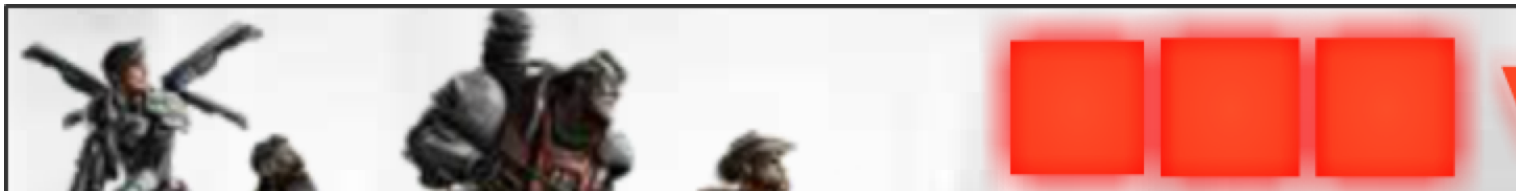
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Nintendo WaveBird Review

by M. Wiley
June 11, 2002

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Wireless was big at this year's E3. Plenty of peripheral makers had cordless controllers on the floor - everything from straight pads to steering wheels to joysticks. While this was exciting to see -- it's about time the technology has advanced to a point at which wireless controllers are actually practical -- the real business was over at the Nintendo booth, where the company reeled in attendees with fully functional WaveBird controllers. Initially announced along with the GameCube console at Space World 2000, the WaveBird has been one of the most highly anticipated pieces of hardware on any console.

The main reason for all the hoopla is that the WaveBird -- in case you see it written differently, the name has undergone several minor changes since its inception -- is the first first-party wireless controller. Strict historians and pesky know-it-all interns might take issue with that statement, recalling Nintendo's ill-fated NES Satellite from the late 1980s, but the WaveBird is the first independent cordless pad.

And today's the day: The WaveBird has finally landed. To celebrate the event, we all went to the mall at lunch and promptly bought all the WaveBirds in _____. I kid you not - all of them. We felt vaguely bad for normal consumers, who would have to look elsewhere, but we didn't feel that bad. We were also ushered through our purchase by Fran, whose "strike hard, strike fast, no mercy" mentality enabled us to break our pangs of guilt like so many toothpicks. We were armed and ready for a wonderfully wireless day.

In short, the WaveBird lived up to or exceeded all of our expectations, some of which were just plain shattered. If you are considering buying an additional controller for your GCN, then I suggest holding off, saving for a few more days, and buying a WaveBird. It's that good. With plenty of range, flexible operation, and long battery life, the WaveBird is a truly amazing controller, and one whose impact will doubtlessly be felt throughout the industry.

One of the biggest improvements in wireless control is the implementation of RF (radio frequency) technology. The alternative, IR (infrared), requires line of sight to operate, which is extremely impractical considering that few of us play games in empty rooms while keeping our controllers pointing directly toward the console. RF signals are (theoretically) unhindered by such household items as walls, tables, etc. I am not sure which frequency the WaveBird uses -- I assume that it communicates at 900Mhz, which is cheaper and less disruptive than 2.4Ghz -- but it works like a charm.



Initial claims of operating range varied wildly. The packaging suggests staying within 20 feet of the receiver, which plugs directly into a controller port. The first thing we did is walk as far away as we could while maintaining control. Fran took a controller and started hiking, continuing until I told him that the signal was lost. We had trouble believing the results, a stunning 90 feet. Further down you'll see a picture of our experiment. Overkill? Of course. However, you can be absolutely sure that the WaveBird will operate within your living room, bedroom, etc. And if you're playing in a room that's too big for the WaveBird, then you've nothing to complain about in this world.

We ran our test using the included pair of AA batteries, which were presumably new. As battery life drains, range might decrease, which might be why Nintendo makes the 20-foot claim. At any rate, the WaveBird has plenty of range.

To facilitate multi-player gaming, the WaveBird operates on one of sixteen available channels. You simply set the channel on the controller and then set the appropriate channel on the receiver. The only problem here is reading the seriously undersized numbers on the dials. Nintendo should have made the numbers opposite the color of the dial, as they are extremely hard to read, even under bright lights. If you were in a dark room, then it would be practically impossible.



Obviously, you're never going to have sixteen controllers running simultaneously. However, the sixteen channels come in handy with even four players. When we connected four WaveBirds we encountered some light interference with one of the channels. (You'll witness this in one of the attached movies.) We simply moved said controller to a channel farther from the others. We're not entirely sure how the channel system works, but we suggest, for good measure, that you skip channels while you play. For example, you could use 1, 3, 5, and 7 instead of 1, 2, 3, and 4. This cleared up our (minor) problems immediately.

Unfortunately we could not test the battery life. Nintendo claims 100 hours, but company claims aren't always the most reliable numbers. There are also many variables that affect battery life: non-stop vs. periodic use, button intensive games vs. simple driving, etc. We will post findings after we arrive at some sort of averages. However, given Nintendo's reputation, you can bet that the battery life will be at least acceptable. (And keep in mind that we were running the WaveBird at distances far beyond Nintendo's claim.)

So what do you give up for all this goodness? Most importantly, the WaveBird has no rumble effect. Vibration feedback requires a motor, which sucks battery energy like nobody's business. You will see a few wireless

controllers hit the streets this year with the rumble feature. However, the battery life always bottoms out to two or three hours with the effect turned on. One of Nintendo's main goals was designing a long-lasting controller, so vibration went out the window early. And the only reason we don't suggest totally abandoning wired controllers in favor of WaveBirds is that you will need vibration feedback occasionally. For example, the pad might shake lightly when you find a secret in a game.

Besides the lack of rumble feedback, the only issue is maintaining a battery arsenal, which obviously has everything to do with the owner and nothing to do with Nintendo. However, it is imperative that you keep extras on hand. (Keep them in the fridge.) Few things would be as frustrating as reaching a crucial point in a game only to run out of juice.



Ninety feet and still going strong. Click image to enlarge.
Matt's Comments

Nintendo's wireless WaveBird controller is my father. It owns me -- there is no doubting that. From the moment I first used it, I knew I would have to worship it for the rest of my life. Really, you've read our review -- you know we love this thing. Is there really any point to me adding further comments on it? Well, just to be on the safe side...

I've put WaveBird to the test. I played it recently for about seven hours straight with Silicon Knights' *Eternal Darkness: Sanity's Requiem* -- probably the game most of you can't wait to test the wireless trophy on. It performed flawlessly from a couple feet away, and then from ten feet, and after that 20 feet. In fact, in my entire play time with the game, the WaveBird never missed a beat. Since then, I've had the chance to use the controller with GCN titles like *TimeSplitters 2*, *Resident Evil*, *Super Smash Bros. Melee*, and *XG3 Extreme G Racing*. It's worked perfectly every single time. Whether it's a slow exploration process of Capcom's survival horror title or twitch-trigger reactions present in Eidos' shooter, the controller handles the situations without any blemishes.

I can sit behind my desk at work and play games on the television ten feet away, an impossibility before. I can sit on my couch at home and play without worry of someone walking in and interfering with the wires, tripping over them, or whatever. If I wanted to, I could set up mirrors down my hallway and play in

a different room entirely, watching the television screen off the reflections. Of course, I'm not insane, so I wouldn't do that. But I could. Or, I could wheel my television out to my front yard, and then walk to the very rear of my backyard and play. I might be institutionalized for this, but the possibility is there. The point is, the signal is strong -- totally uninterrupted in my experience, and it goes far -- much farther than Nintendo's advertised example of 20 feet, in most cases.

The controller is as comfortable as ever so have no concerns about that. The signals work fine with four WaveBird controllers so that there is no criss-crossing, and the receiver -- which fits snugly into the controller slot, does not block out the memory card slots in any way. If you're still undecided, you have only two drawbacks to consider. The first is that the WaveBird has no rumble functions. I personally couldn't possibly care less about this particular omission quite honestly. It's always seemed more of a novelty feature than a gameplay-enhancing one to me. Until Nintendo releases a GameCube title that really puts the rumble to good use, I won't miss it at all. I'd much rather have the benefits of no wires in my living room. But this is a decision for everyone to make. If rumble is something you absolutely cannot forego, WaveBird -- slick as it is -- is not the controller for you. The other consideration is battery life. The average Joe will suck roughly 100 hours of play time out of two AA batteries with WaveBird -- quite a feat as far as I'm concerned. It's a pretty amazing number, actually. So unless you're afraid of changing batteries, or are just abnormally cheap about buying additional ones, this really shouldn't pose any problems.

WaveBird is one of those peripheral devices that totally does what I'd hoped it would, and because of that my work and home environments are now completely void of wired controllers. If I had a dog, he would be pissed. But my friends and I couldn't be happier. Gaming just got a little more relaxed, a little less messy, and a lot more fun.

One of the absolute best hardware buys you can make.

Fran's Comments

I'll avoid repeating too much of what was stated in the review and make this brief. WaveBird is awesome on its own merits. If Nintendo is to be believed it lasts close to 100 hours at best, works at insane distances (we tested up to around 90 feet), and feels just like the official standard controller with a smidgen more weight. This makes WaveBird a must-have in my book. It gives me the opportunity to pack up the GameCube behind closed doors in my entertainment center -- no wires, no hassle -- and feel totally free from the console. You'd be amazed how much of a difference it makes to strike all worries from your mind that you may yank the cord from the console, or even harm the GameCube accidentally.

You definitely shouldn't give up the standard controller, though. The rumble feature is very important in games like Zelda where you actually use rumble to find secret items. Well, it's something we expect in the GameCube Zelda anyhow. And, I'd be lying if I didn't get certain pleasure out of knowing my opponents controllers shake wildly when I bludgeon them with the Lipstick flower in Super Smash Bros. Melee. Still, the simple fact is that WaveBird is the unbeatable wireless controller for GameCube. You're not going to find a better one, unless a third-party manages to make both a better controller design and better wireless combined.

So, go out right now, and buy yourself at least one WaveBird. I guarantee you and your friends will be fighting for rights to it in multiplayer games. If you can afford, buy more than one. You won't regret it.

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