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[History of the Game Controller](#)

A quick run down on everyone's favorite input device



The SNES Controller
Wikipedia

Ever since the very beginning of video gaming, the controller has been the best (and usually the only) way of man-machine interaction. Whether you are from the arcade generation or have recently bought your first console, it's impossible not to have crossed paths even remotely with a game controller. My grandmother may not know to turn on a computer but she's definitely seen me play on my NES when I was wee-little. And I suspect she also played a little but never said so.

But aren't you curious where, when and why it all began? I know I am and because I'm a "gadgets" editor and controllers are definitely "gadgets" enough... prepare yourselves to be amazed by the enticing history of game controllers. Bear in mind though that this particular history lesson will not deal with figures and dates as much but with controller types and a few interesting historical facts.

I've searched far and wide into the deepest depths of the Internet for the answer to what to some seems to be a pretty simple question - "Which was the first controller to ever be cataloged or described as a 'game controller?'"

And the answer was pretty surprising: **The Knob**. Although many place the knob in the same family as "Paddle" game controllers, I personally disagree and prefer considering it as being in a class of its own. That's mainly because the knob made its first appearance in 1947, when Thomas T. Goldsmith Jr. and Estle Ray Mann filed the patent for a Cathode-Ray Tube Amusement Device which included knobs as controllers.

The Paddle, however, first made its appearance in 1972, together with the legendary game Pong. Although basically working the same way as the knob (a round wheel that could be turned for different effects), it also had one or more fire buttons. Interestingly enough, the name "paddle" comes from the fact that Pong, the first game to use the paddle, was a simulation of table tennis, whose racquets are dubbed paddles.

The 1980s brought a series of interesting game controllers. I guess the first would be **The Joystick**, a device that first made its appearance around late 1977s - early 1978s, together with the first Atari 2600. The first such gadget was a standard, digital, 1 "fire" button joystick that connected via a DE-9 connector. Although a device made for user entertainment, the joystick is inspired by a very real and important device: an aircraft controller (everybody's seen Top Gun... and if you haven't, you should). The joystick is still being used today in order to control airships in flying or space simulators.

The year 1983 was the one that basically defined what the standard for game controllers would be for a long time. Together with the Nintendo Entertainment Station, the NES Controller made its debut.

The **Gamepad** (also called **Joypad** by some) is a device with a direction controller situated on its left side and action buttons on the right. Even if, along the years it changed its shape, size and gained a few extra buttons and options, the device retained its basic form and button placement.

What was added along the years you ask? Well, a lot actually. Instead of two fire buttons, the controller now has four, it retained its digital directional pad but now has two extra analog sticks, four extra buttons on the front side (Left 1 and 2 and Right 1 and 2), a vibration function and even wireless and motion sensing technology. It went a long way from playing Contra on the NES. The NES gamepad also spurred some very interesting health concerns, with early versions causing severe finger burning, sore fingers or aching hands.

Now, the gamepad is the main controller for two different consoles: Sony's PlayStation 3 and Microsoft's Xbox 360. Nintendo gave it up and came up with a new one that would once again shock the world of gaming controllers - motion sensing technology controllers.

Or **The Wii Remote and Nunchuck**. Using accelerometers to detect its approximate orientation and acceleration, it also has a built-in camera that lets it function as a pointing device as well. These devices turned out to be a gold mine for Nintendo, as they yet again wrote a page in history and climbed to the top. It is rumored, however, that Sony and Microsoft are planning their own versions of the Wiimote and launching them in the months to come.

So, **The Knob, The Paddle, The Joystick, The Gamepad** and the **Motion Sensing Controller**. I bet you're thinking "That can't be all of them!". And... you would be right. Digging a little deeper, we'll find that, along the years, a lot of interesting controllers made episodic appearances or are just too "multifunctional to be fit into the gaming controller category." That being said, let's see what has been left out, shall we?

I guess the first would be **The Light Gun**, a peripheral that was used to mimic the actual "shooting" of targets on the screen. First making its appearance on the Magnavox Odyssey, it became famous when Nintendo included it in its NES console and especially thanks to a certain game entitled Duck Hunt.

I think the **Steering Wheel** would be next. Although essentially a larger version of the paddle, the steering wheel tries to perfectly reproduce the functionality and design of a real car's steering wheel in order to create better in-game immersion. Current generation steering wheels even include pedals.

But perhaps the combination that best fits the description of a "gaming controller that isn't exactly a gaming controller" is the **mouse and keyboard setup**. Although the keyboard and mouse are input devices throughout which the user interacts with his/her computer, they can also be used to control various games such as Shooting games, Racing games, Strategy games, Simulation games and so on. Different versions of the keyboard and mouse can be found as actual gaming controllers for early consoles.

Other devices that are a little too specialized (works the other way around) or unknown to be worth a detailed mentioning are the following: dance pads, the microphone, the fishing rod, the touchscreen, instrument panels, balance boards and so on.

I hope you enjoyed this small trip to the world of game controllers. This is me signing off with the promise that someday, I will write a really detailed article about the wonderful and exciting world of gaming input devices.