WI-FYI

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Last week I turned 38 years old and my son turned 6. He got a Super Mario Brothers game for our Wii, a Super Mario Brothers DVD, and a gift certificate for Wii points, so he can download "classic" games onto our Wii's hard drive. Watching him open his gifts, I reflected on the unbelievable advances in technology during my lifetime.

For my 6th birthday in 1978, I received as a gift the 'Football' game for our Atari 2600. The game had 4 players per team, and they looked more like fire hydrants than people. I would play for hours, as I sat on the floor close to the console because the joystick cable was pretty short. Today, I can play 'Madden NFL 11' on my Xbox 360 with wireless controllers and I have a difficult time distinguishing the game from real TV.

Our Atari was hooked up to our Zenith 26-inch color TV. It had a wireless remote control that had 3 buttons: power, channel up and channel down. The remote used ultrasonic sound to work by mechanically striking aluminum rods of specific dimensions. A receiver in the TV responded to these different frequencies. Pressing the buttons on the remote emitted an audible noise that led to them being called "clickers." Today, our Wii is hooked up to a 56-inch flat screen, high definition TV that uses an infra-red remote, just like the wireless controllers for the Wii.

My son downloaded the original 'Super Mario Brothers' game onto our Wii, using a wireless internet connection. The game is marketed by Nintendo as a "classic" because it was released a quarter of a century ago. Of course, I had to wait until I was a teenager before I got to play the groundbreaking game.

Thanks to the U.S. Federal Communications Commission, I may soon be able to download more "classic" video games in half the time.

This week the FCC looked at approving what it calls "super Wi-Fi," a new class of bigger, faster and better internet connections. Dubbed "Wi-Fi on steroids," the agency has been testing super Wi-Fi and discovered its wavelengths, which are significantly longer than those of the traditional 2.4-GHz Wi-Fi, allow signals to travel further, to go through walls, and to transfer more information more quickly.

A huge benefit of the new-and-improved system will be the availability of wireless internet in rural areas and the reduction of "dead zones" in Wi-Fi networks. The FCC also believes the innovation will boost the business world by allowing large files to be easily transferred between computers and networks.

For super Wi-Fi to come about, the FCC would have to vote to open up some of the "white space" between TV channels for use by anyone. This spectrum, known as "vacant airwaves," allows for fast file transfers over areas that are several times as large as traditional Wi-Fi networks. If approved, it would be the first time since 1985, the year Nintendo released Super Mario Brothers, that the FCC has freed up portions of the wireless spectrum for unlicensed use.

According to FCC Chairman Julius Genachowski, the actions the FCC took in 1985 led to the development of Wi-Fi and infra-red TV and Wii remotes and he hopes the new move will similarly encourage "innovators and entrepreneurs to develop new and exciting products for the public."

If the Mario Brothers were already super with regular Wi-Fi, I'm guessing they'll be omnipotent with Super Wi-Fi.