

Maki Kaji

Who is behind the world Sudoku craze? It is Maki Kaji, founder of Japanese-based logic puzzle company, Nikoli Co. Ltd. Kaji named the puzzle *Sudoku*, which means bachelor numbers with a little sense of humor: “the single-digit number should be kept bachelor and unmarried.” He is known as *The Godfather of Sudoku*.

While working at a printing company, Kaji started Nikoli in 1980 with his friends because there was no puzzle magazine in the Japanese market at that time. Since then, his company created more than 250 types of logic puzzles. Many of Nikoli’s puzzles are handcrafted which makes the company the only kind like it in the world. Nikoli employs 23 people and publishes more than 150 puzzle magazines and books in addition to providing puzzle supplies to more than 100 newspapers and magazines.

Kaji was born in 1951 on the northern island of Japan, Hokkaido. In high school, he played tennis and made it to the top eight at the national championship. He continued his education at Keio University but decided to drop out. Kaji has worked on dozens of different jobs from road construction, welding operation, and sleeper-train dismantlement to German-Japanese patent document translation for pharmaceutical companies and running errands for musicians.

Kaji’s encounter with the original version of Sudoku dates back to 1979. His friend who took a trip to the U.S. brought back a puzzle magazine called *Dell* as a souvenir. A puzzle called *Number Place* in the issue intrigued him. Nikoli eventually created a new refined version in which each number worked as a clue in finding the next one. Nikoli’s givens, the numbers already filled in cells as clues, are always found in a symmetrical pattern. The refined version was visually appealing too, which was another factor for popularity. He introduced the modified version in 1984 and it became widespread among Japanese readers.

The New York Times featured Kaji in the article, *Inside Japan’s Puzzle Palace*, and said “Nikoli, which publishes puzzle magazines and books, is widely regarded as the world’s most prolific wellspring of logic games and brainteasers.” It also stated that if there were to be another puzzle craze after Sudoku, it would most likely spring from Nikoli.

For the past 25 years, Kaji has built an open subculture by getting its readers and fans involved in the process of puzzle creation and invention. Readers can submit their new puzzle ideas as well as existing puzzle questions they created. Nikoli’s staff reviews them and publishes those chosen with the names of their creators. This business model was credited in the book, *We Are Smarter Than Me: How to Unleash the Power of Crowds in Your Business* (2007).

Kaji enjoys playing golf, fishing and work. He also loves betting on racehorses and named his company Nikoli after a horse that won a 1980 race in Ireland. Kaji considers the following phrases as good words to live by: “Make a living out of what you love. In this way, you don’t have to work forever.” “Take it easy.” “Whatever will be, will be.”

Kaji has a vision of creating a worldwide puzzle community with foreign publishers and through multi-media platforms such as video games, cell phones and an online puzzle site on nikoli.com.

