

Virtual Boy

By Steve Kleff

Picture, if you will, a GameBoy sitting on a tripod and viewed through a pair of cheap 3-D glasses.

This simplified description captures the basic look and feel of Nintendo's much-hyped Virtual Boy. However, Virtual Boy is a much more sophisticated machine than its GameBoy cousin, and with an estimated street price of about \$159, it costs significantly more than a pair of cardboard 3-D glasses.

Too heavy to be a portable, head-mounted unit, Virtual Boy was instead designed to sit on a counter or tabletop. Players stick their faces into a viewer that resembles a fantastic ViewMaster and control the game action with a six-button controller with dual directional pads and pistol grips. Although obviously aimed at children, the comfortable viewer is big enough for adults to use—even with glasses. The well-made, sturdy controller houses the six AA batteries needed to power the unit.

Virtual Boy uses a 32-bit Reduced Instruction Set Computing chipset and twin LED displays that manipulate red images against a black background to create a three-dimensional image. An



Mario Clash features a familiar cast of characters.



Virtual Boy looks better than it plays.

eye shade blocks out ambient light and helps immerse players in Virtual Boy games.

The first five Virtual Boy titles lean heavily on tried-and-true kids' favorites: Mario's Dream Tennis pits well-known Nintendo



Bob and weave with Telero Buzzer.

Hit the courts with Mario and friends in Dream Tennis.



A classic goes 3-D in Galactic Pinball.

characters such as Mario, Donkey Kong Jr., and Yoshi exactly each other on the courts; Mario Clash is an action/puzzle game in which players clear their way through yet another cast of Mario characters; Telero Buzzer uses a perspective similar to Punch Out to get in your face; Galactic Pinball includes four cosmic pinball games with realistic bumpers and ball physics; and Red Alarm sets a Zaxxon-type space shooter in a wire-frame world. Mario's Tennis ships with the unit; the others are available separately for about \$40 each.

While a step above the GameBoy standard, these games aren't exactly groundbreaking. Dream Tennis and Galactic Pinball seem to best capture the 3-D look and feel Nintendo is after and are the most fun to play. Telero Buzzer is felled by kludgy controls, and you can find much better shooters than Red Alarm—shooters that don't require you to stick your head in a box.

This leads to what is perhaps the make-or-break question for Virtual Boy: Will people feel comfortable sticking their face into this silly looking machine—for hours at a time?

Nintendo urges players to take a 10- or 15-minute break each hour, and you can set the unit to automatically provide a game break every ten minutes. The documents that come with the unit also contain an above-average number of disclaimers and personal-injury warnings.

Why? Extended play can lead to nausea—as this reviewer can personally attest—and it can take a few minutes for your eyes to adjust to reality upon leaving the world of Virtual Boy.

Nintendo is working on a cable that will hook two units together for multiplayer games—it's due next year. Also, if you don't want to replace the Virtual Boy's batteries every seven hours or so, you'll have to shell out another \$16 or so for an AC adapter.

For the moment, Virtual Boy's minuses clearly outweigh its pluses. But Virtual Boy is an interesting concept that could get more intriguing when and if better games arrive. (Nintendo, 800-255-3700; \$159.99)

Platforms: Virtual Boy
Rating: ★ ★ 1/2