

FEATURE



# Virtual Insanity?

*We look back at Nintendo's most infamous folly: the Virtual Boy. Aspirin recommended...*

**F**or the past 30 years, the word 'innovation' has regularly been associated with Nintendo. The company has been responsible for so many exciting and influential creations – Donkey Kong, the D-pad, the NES, the Game Boy, and more recently the DS and Wii, to name just a few of their groundbreaking endeavours – that its history reads like the evolution of gaming as a whole.

However, there are a handful of pages in Nintendo's long history book that have been deliberately stuck together with chewing gum. Pages that the company would rather nobody read ever again, because they tell the story of a rare thing in Nintendo's hugely successful history. They tell the story of a Nintendo creation that was, to put it bluntly, a complete, unmitigated disaster. They tell the story of the Virtual Boy.

A system with one major selling point – all of its games were in 3D – the Virtual Boy may have shown all the typical signs of Nintendo innovation but for once the reality didn't quite live up to the vision. People complained of headaches after playing it, it didn't sell quickly enough and by the time Nintendo had stopped supporting it one short year later, only 800,000 systems existed worldwide and only 22 games had been released for it.



So, with 2010 marking the 15th anniversary of this unique, short-lived console, we've decided it's time to unstick those history book pages and give you some background on one of the only standalone Nintendo systems to never make it to the UK. This, dear readers, is the tragic tale of the Nintendo Virtual Boy.

## The Virtual Boy Collection

Here's your checklist. The complete list of all 22 games released for the Virtual Boy in America and Japan. Catch 'em all!



### 01. 3D Tetris

The last ever Virtual Boy game. A confusing version of *Tetris* where you could now move the pieces in three dimensions as they dropped down a well.



### 02. Galactic Pinball

Developed by Intelligent Systems (*Advance Wars*), this had four tables and was one of the better Virtual Boy games.



### 03. Golf

A full 18-hole golf course. This was developed by T&E Soft, known for its golf titles, and as a result was a well-designed little golf game.



### 04. Inmouse No Yakata

A first-person shooter for the Virtual Boy might seem like a great idea but this suffered from awful controls and ugly sprites.

In the early '90s, things were going very well for Nintendo. The newly-released SNES was outselling Sega's Mega Drive worldwide and its Game Boy had fought off stiff competition from the Sega Game Gear and Atari Lynx. It was time to look to the future for new ideas and Nintendo turned to Gunpei Yokoi for the answer.

Yokoi-san was the head of the Nintendo Research & Development 1 group, who had previously been responsible for producing such iconic Nintendo games as *Donkey Kong* (along with Shigeru Miyamoto), *Kid Icarus* and *Metroid*. Yokoi was best known for his hardware creations however, since he was the man behind the Game

& Watch, R.O.B the Robot and, most importantly, the all-conquering Game Boy.

The overwhelming success of the Game Boy led many at Nintendo to believe that Yokoi was to hardware what Miyamoto was to software, so they asked him and his R&D1 team to come up with another portable system that would take the

## Oh Boy!

A closer look at the Virtual Boy hardware

### The Visor

Inside those soft goggle blinkers lie two LED screens. Each screen has a resolution of 384 x 224 pixels and the Virtual Boy would switch between each screen extremely quickly in order to give the illusion of 3D. For the few minutes before the crippling headache kicks in, it still looks great today.

### The Controller

If there's one thing about the Virtual Boy that stands the test of time, it's the controller. Featuring twin D-pads, shoulder buttons and an ergonomic shape that the N64 controller would later adopt, it's one of our favourite Nintendo controllers ever.



### The Focus Knob

Many of those who complained about headaches with the Virtual Boy probably didn't try sliding this about. It sharpens and blurs the image so you can find a focus that suits your own personal eye strength. Get the focus perfect for a much more comfortable gaming experience.

### The Stand

Despite being a 'portable' console, there was no way you could hold the Virtual Boy's headset up if you were using both hands with the controller. Luckily it came with a stand that you could clip the Virtual Boy onto. A fancier stand with adjustable height cost extra.



### 05. Jack Bros

The twin mascots of Atlus' successful *Megami Tensei* RPG series star in this top-down action game. An enjoyable adventure.

### 06. Mario Clash

A 3D version of the original *Mario Bros*. You have to clear each level by switching between the foreground and background.

### 07. Mario's Tennis

While it does a great job of showing off the system's 3D effects it's not much fun. Six characters, two game modes, one headache.

### 08. Nester's Funky Bowling

Nester was a character created by Nintendo Power magazine, granted his very own game. A very average bowling title.

### 09. Panic Bomber

A puzzle game starring characters from the *Bomberman* games. A 3D version of *Bomberman* could have been great. A missed opportunity.

### 10. Red Alarm

The best game on the Virtual Boy. A 3D shooter in the same vein as the original *Starwing*. It even sported an innovative replay feature.

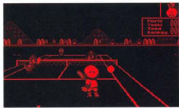
success of the Game Boy to the next level. Surely his golden touch couldn't fall them?

At the time, the big thing in gaming was virtual reality. A company called Virtuality had started producing VR games where customers could go to an arcade, pay a fiver, stick on a motion-tracking headset and gloves, and immerse themselves in a polygonal world. This brand new tech was to provide the initial inspiration for the Virtual Boy.

### In For A Penny...

In his years at Nintendo, Yokoi always stuck to the same principle. He insisted it was always better to make innovative products using cheap pre-existing technology than produce flashy new products with brand new, expensive tech. This was his thinking behind the LCD Game & Watches and the black-and-white Game Boy, and their success proved that his theory was a wise one. It's a business model that continues to keep Nintendo ahead of the pack with the relatively tech-lite DS and Wii.

For this reason, Yokoi decided that while the Virtual Boy would be innovative and offer a truly



**Love Futility** Mario's Tennis's 3D effects made it the most headache-inducing game on the system.



**Bowled Away** Virtual Bowling is the rarest Virtual Boy game. A single copy will set you back £1,000.

**"It offered twin D-pads long before other systems did the same with analogue sticks"**

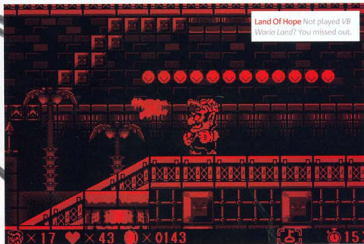
unique gaming experience, it still needed to be as inexpensive as possible for the player. It was this decision that led to the infamous red screen. Because the Virtual Boy's screen had to move quickly to give the effect of 3D (each frame displayed in a separate eye, and when shown quickly one after the other they gave the illusion

of 3D), it had to have a clear, crisp display so the image didn't blur when it moved. At the time, the cheapest option available to Yokoi was red LED pixels—smaller versions of the sort of thing you see on power lights on TVs. Blue and green LEDs became available near the end of the Virtual Boy's development, but they would have been so expensive that the system's price tag would have nudged \$500, so Nintendo stuck with the primitive black-and-red display.

### Out Of Control

Naturally, the headset and its 3D graphics were the big talking points of the Virtual Boy. What's less talked about but almost as impressive however was its controller. Released before the N64, it's clear to see that the Virtual Boy's M-shaped controller was the inspiration for its more successful sibling. It was also unique in that it offered two D-pads, long before other systems did the same with twin analogue sticks. These were designed to allow players to move in all dimensions in 3D games but ultimately ended up being wasted as only a handful of games bothered to utilise them.

The controller also housed the system's batteries. The Virtual Boy took six AA batteries, which let it run for around seven hours. This may seem a lot but consider there were no DS-style chargeable batteries at the time and the Game Boy was offering a similar life with just four



**Land Of Hope** Not played VB? *World Land?* You missed out.



## 11. SD Gundam Dimension War

One of the four rare Virtual Boy games, this is a turn-based strategy game featuring robots and vehicles from the Gundam universe.



## 12. Space Invaders Collection

Another rare one. This lets you play in two different ways: a normal 2D version and a special 3D version.



## 13. Space Squash

A 3D squash game where you have to make your character, the Peatron, hit a ball past your opponent numerous times to defeat them.



## 14. Teleroboxer

The easiest Virtual Boy game to find. A first-person boxing game where you have to defeat seven other robots, including one controlled by a cat.



## 15. V-Tetris

This is more or less like normal Tetris, except for an extra mode where the blocks are dropped into a large cylinder which you can rotate round.



## 16. Vertical Force

A vertical shooter with a nice gimmick: the action takes place on two planes so you can switch between the foreground and background.

batteries, and the feat seems more impressive. Less impressive though was the manner in which the Virtual Boy had to be played.

Despite constantly being promoted as a 'portable' system, it was clear the Virtual Boy was anything but. Since the whole concept of it involved completely covering the player's field of vision and blocking out everything around them,

there was absolutely no way it could have been played on the go. As a result, there were only two ways to play it properly: either lying down with your head on top of it or clamping it on the flimsy metal stand provided, sitting it on a table and resting your eyes in the visor. This second method was the most widely-used and we can tell you from first-hand experience that it's not a very

comfortable position. After ten minutes or so, your hunched back was aching, forcing you to constantly shift in your seat.

### Dead On Arrival

Three years into development, Nintendo was getting impatient with Yokoi. It was eager to get his R&D1 team involved in developing games for the Ultra 64, its brand new console now in development in America. As a result, production of the Virtual Boy was sped up and it was finally unveiled to the general public at the Shoshinkai electronics show in November 1994. Yokoi would later say that he had never intended for the Virtual Boy to be released so soon, but whether

## The Games You'll Never Play

There were loads of Virtual Boy games in development when it was discontinued. Here are some of the most promising...



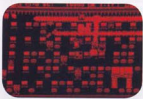
### VB Mario Land

Mario Clash was originally a mini-game in a much larger game. The bigger game was VB Mario Land, a promising Mario platformer with some neat 3D effects.



### Starfox

It might just have been a tech demo but when the Virtual Boy was first announced Nintendo showed an Arwing-like vehicle spinning around in full 3D.



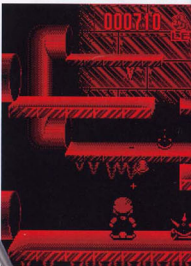
### Virtual Bomberman

Panic Bomber may have featured Bomberman but this was going to be the big daddy. All that remains though are a few grainy screenshots.



### GoldenEye 007

No, not a primitive version of the classic N64 shooter but instead a racing game which sees you as Bond dodging obstacles and shooting other cars.



**Colour Clash** Mario Clash was one of the better games on the system and used 3D extremely well.



**17. Virtual Bowling**

The rarest Virtual Boy game by far and a great bowling title. A copy in good condition will set you back about £700 these days.

**18. Virtual Boy Wario Land**

A traditional Wario Land game and a great platformer. The 3D effects are rather limited but less is more in this case.

**19. Virtual Fishing**

Go on, guess. Okay, we'll tell you. It's a fishing game. And not a bad one at that, with a nice underwater camera effect.

**20. Virtual Lab**

A puzzle game set in an intestine, but it was clearly rushed out. Nintendo is even spelt incorrectly on the game's cartridge ("Ninnintendo").

**21. Virtual League Baseball**

Not the best baseball game you'll ever play but it had some nice camera effects that zoomed out to show the whole stadium.

**22. Water World**

The "most expensive movie ever made" (at the time) also spawned the worst Virtual Boy game ever made. An atrocious shooter.

## "It is Nintendo's least successful system by far, with only 770,000 units sold"

that was just an excuse for its disastrous performance is open to debate.

Initial reaction from the public at the Shoshinkai event wasn't quite as glowing as Nintendo had hoped it would be, with the various games magazines in attendance (including our fondly remembered sister mag *Total!*) complaining of headaches after extended

use of the system and claims that the games themselves were drab and unexciting.

The Virtual Boy was released in Japan on 21 July 1995 and arrived in America on 14 August 1995, three weeks later. It was initially priced at \$180, a tag that proved too high for many gamers, despite the cost-cuttings that Yokoi's team had made. Sales were very poor and over the next few months the system would see steady price drops. By Christmas its price had been slashed to just \$99 but still nobody bought it.

**A Cautionary Tale**

After less than a year on the shelves, Nintendo discontinued the Virtual Boy before European gamers had the chance to try it out. When the dust had settled, the figures made for grim reading: it is Nintendo's least successful system by far, with only 770,000 units sold and only 22 games released for it before its premature death.

Although it had been a team effort, Yokoi felt personally to blame for the Virtual Boy's failure, and felt that Nintendo no longer had faith in his abilities as a designer, despite his successes with the Game & Watch and Game Boy. He eventually resigned from Nintendo and created his own company, Koto, starting development on a rival handheld, the WonderSwan. Yokoi would never see the WonderSwan's release. His life was cut tragically short when he was killed in a car accident at the age of 56.

The Virtual Boy will live on as Nintendo's biggest failure; a rare miss for a company that has hit the target so many times over the past few decades. Still, it remains a prime example of what they do best: take risks. In a parallel universe, its fate could easily have been shared by the DS and Wii—similarly bold innovations. For that pioneering spirit, plus its not inconsiderable charm, it should be celebrated. Just remember to keep a pack of Nurofen to hand... ➔

