

VIRTUAL REALITY



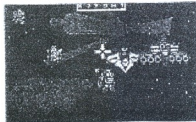
I've never made a secret of my deep seated passion for Nintendo's Virtual Boy, and it's premature demise from the console scene into the Retro domain has encouraged countless rumours about missing games, multi-carts, TV compatible prototypes and lost accessories, indeed, many such rumours have been repeated in these very pages. Perhaps that is part of the Virtual Boy's misique, the fact that it's so hard to pin point out exactly what was in development at the time the plug was pulled, or indeed how much has slipped out into the public domain. While I can't yet bring you conclusive proof of VB Mario Kart or G Zero, it's good to be able to return to the VB with a feature on some of the rarities which really do exist, and here's the proof...



GUNDAM - BANDAI

Gundam has long been listed as the rarest game in the Virtual Boy's library. Released only in Japan and at the end of the machine's life, most retailers failed to stock the game, leaving Bandai to manufacture a very limited number of games, the vast majority of them instantly snatched up by dedicated Japanese Nintendo collectors. Having tried for so long to acquire a copy, expectations were probably far higher than they deserved to be. I had previously been told that the game relied on Japanese text and was therefore very difficult to play for Western gamers. I'm happy to report that is not the case. On starting the game you are presented with the Gundam logo, and familiar options. Games can be saved mid-session on the cartridge itself, and restarted from the front end. Once you enter the game itself, it doesn't take long to realise that this is not your average shoot-em-up. You are put in charge of a small team of mercenaries, and a couple of large space ships. Each turn you are given so many moves for each one of your units.

Meanwhile the computer controls a rival group, intent on destroying your mini army. And so it goes, move your players around the grid, towards the enemy. Once in adjacent squares, you can attack, or if you are in control of one of your Space ships you can attack from a few more squares away. Once attacking the game flips to a different style of game. If in control of one of your characters, you enter into an arcade space fight. First you try and shoot him as he comes slowly towards you, a simple target based shooting exercise. Then once he's close enough you progress to a multi-layered arena. Basically try and shoot the enemy with the various weapons you carry and avoid his fire. You can dive both into the background and foreground to escape getting hit. This section is timed, if you don't manage to actually kill your opponent before the time runs out, your new health ratings will be recorded when you return to the grid section. Alternatively, if you attack with a space ship, your craft is automatically scrolled across the screen as you bombard your hapless enemy.



TOP LEFT: The Cartridge in the flesh, above a picture from the arcade Space ship shoot-em-up section.
TOP: Yep, it's the game's box, but hey, nice artwork.
ABOVE: The strategy grid section of the game.

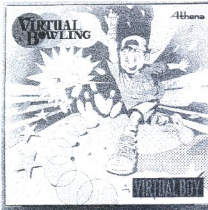
It follows then that it is better to destroy the more harmful enemy space ships before the alien enemies, who while still quite difficult, fail to reap as much damage on your own characters. That is it, really, if you manage to kill all the enemy team, you progress to the next level, and even harder teams. Your players pick up both experience and weapons as the game goes on too. In conclusion then, this is quite a different kind of game for the VB. A kind of strategy war game come RPG which while rather simple, can also be very involving. Sound is good but not exceptional, and graphics, though detailed, are rather poorly animated. Overall, a break from the strict arcade diet of the VB, well, if you can manage to find a copy that is...

RETROGRATING: 83%

LEFT: The scary enemy! RIGHT: It's Gundam, isn't it?



VIRTUAL REALITY



Bowling isn't exactly the most popular video gaming genre at the moment, with this game's N64 equivalent receiving the lowest ratings for the format so far. The story hasn't always been that way. 8-bit titles like Tenth Frame from US Gold, and Mastertronic's



incredibly addictive Strike, have put Bowling firmly into the games charts. While tastes within the mainstream may have changed, you should not write off this least active of sports themes. Indeed, with the current Japanese interest in fishing games, Bowling must be in line for a resurgence into the mainstream anytime now.

Virtual Bowling for the VB should not be confused with the American All Star Bowling title, as they are two different games. This fact may lead you to assume that this title is packed full of Japanese text, but in fact the game uses English as it's primary language. Ok, so why make a Bowling game for the VB? Well, there's



the prime opportunity to create a 3D bowling alley! To play the game requires dexterity. To start you are presented with a lane, you must then decide the angle you are to throw it, next you determine the speed of the shot, and then release. Next is the impressive VB bit. Your bowl is shown at the bottom of the lane, and gently rolls towards the awaiting skittles, the camera smoothly follows the ball right down to the end, where if you've been successful, skittles crash all around your face. This may sound like nothing particularly new, but the experience of following the ball so closely is strangely satisfying. Another feature is the use of cartoon style characters to highlight the accuracy of each shot, not exactly funny, but an obvious attempt to lift the game for sports simulation to arcade game.

I know what your thinking, once you've played a couple of times, what is there to bring you back? Well, the game is quite tricky, unlike previous titles, you can't just aim for exactly the same spot on the screen and score a strike. If you put just a tiny bit too much spin on the bowl, it heads off into the lane gutter with alarming regularity. Mark my words, this game is tough. There is also the option to play against a friend, if the computer opponents get too tough for you. And no, don't get excited, it's a job of taking it in turns rather than linking up two machines.

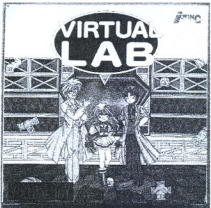
Sound is as chippy as you'd expect from a Japanese game, and the graphics make good use of the hardware. While the skittles aren't drawn with vector graphics, they are well animated and fall realistically. While there are many games we have in our collections which we include only for collecting sake, Virtual Bowling is a refreshing return to a simple yet addictive gaming format which must rate in the top ten best VB games, and as such a valuable addition to your series.

Another of the late releases in Japan, Virtual Bowling is far rarer than Super Space Invaders, but thanks to it's lower profile copies have been seen selling for around the \$100 mark.

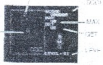
RETROCRATING: 82%



VIRTUAL REALITY



One of the things I love so much about Retrogaming, is discovering games which are not even meant to exist. Make no mistake, Virtual Lab is one such game. First rumoured in these very pages well over a year ago, the game's only sign of existence was a promotional leaflet released by J-Wing showing artwork from the game. The story went that the game was a bizarre role playing title where players mixed potions in a chemistry lab. Well, it's our job to dispose of such Retro folk lore, and tell you



that Virtual Lab is in fact a PUZZLE GAME!!! J-Wing, a company which originally made it's name producing Famicom games, has certainly done it's best to make this title's packaging and imagery look completely un-puzzle related. Firstly, you are probably wondering what makes this game so rare, well, production was well underway when Nintendo pulled the plug on the VB. Rather than just give up with the title, J-Wing completed it, believing that the remaining VB faithful would be desperate for a new title. While they were probably right, when it came to releasing the game, retail were no longer interested in games for the format and the release was canned. The only copies to find there way out were given to employees. While all this history is rather fascinating, it does kind of build up expectations for the quality of the game.

On initially booting up the game, you are presented with a decidedly dodgy looking logo, and annoying music with that familiar drum sound that always reminds you of a burp in a coke can. The only options on offer are a change of game speed, Low, Mid and High. A quick press of the start key, and you are into the game. An anime style figure stands at the side of a Tetris style U-Shape, and yep, you've got it, shapes fall from the top of the screen. Rather than just a straight take on the Gameboy classic, Virtual Lab mixes Tetris with Pipeline, showering you with strange blobby shaped tubes, which you have to turn and connect together. If you complete a shape, it then disappears from the screen, allowing you more space to create your next tube. When you create a shape, each of it's segments is counted, giving you a score which the game encourages you to beat. If you then beat that, a bonus angel comes along and clears the straggling pieces you have at the bottom of the screen.



If you do well, then you progress up the levels. Each level introduces more exotic shaped pipes, or throws more than one piece at you at the same time. There is also a suitably annoying tune which plays along with you, which you are bound to be humming days after a session. Overall, it's an obviously rushed product, no frills, no 3D effects except for a few floating stars in the background, and with all it's mystery, this has to be a big let down. However, despite it's flaws, V-Lab is an enjoyable and rather addictive game.



RUSHED RELEASE?? EVEN I CAN SPELL THAT ONE!
RETRORATING - 67%

ONLY IN JAPAN

We take a sly look at a few desirable items the Japanese get the chance to buy, while all us just get to drool over the pictures.

VIRTUAL INSANITY



The Virtual Boy may have been released in the US, but this series of official accessories were only released in Japan. Top is the replacement visor, easily strapped onto the machine. Above are official VB headphones, completely un-special but nicely packaged.

Finally on the left is something far more useful. A clip which plugs into where the battery holder sits, allowing you to plug in your Nes or SNES power supply. This is very beneficial to us UK VB owners, as the US PSU is an all in one version which requires a step down transformer. Packaged accessories like these are already highly collectable, especially for the VB fan who just wants everything. (like me!)