

THE LAST BIG BROTHER: VIRTUAL BOY

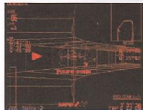


ABOVE: An early prototype design of the Nintendo Virtual Boy. Somehow the head strap still seems to make more sense than the table stand we ended up with.

RIGHT: Perhaps we should be thankful that the shoulder harness was never actually released. It certainly wouldn't do much for your steely cred.



ABOVE: Another peripheral which failed to make it out of Nintendo's R&D departments was the adjustable stand. The evidence of packaging promotes the idea that this unit was actually put into production.



ABOVE/RIGHT: G-Zero prototype screen shots, not to be confused with the other rumoured game, Zero Racers. Note the te-fighters??



BELOW: Four real VB rarities. First is Inhouse, the only first person VB game, next is Space Invaders, below is the Japanese only Space Squash, and puzzle game Virtual Lab, which wasn't actually released.

BELOW: The majority of new information on the missing games comes from promotional literature.

日本システムサプライ **VB**

BOUND HIGH

- ジャンル アクション
- メディア カートリッジ
- 発売予定日 96年7月20日発売
- 手帳 5300円
- 取扱学生優待

NEC

バウンドが勝負を決める

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ABOVE: Dragon Hopper, a shoot-em-up similar in style to Red Alarm. The long known existence of both Bound High and Dragon Hopper suggests that they were almost complete before they disappeared.



ABOVE: Virtual Boy Space Invaders is one game which truly deserves its highly inflated price. Complete with original and new 3D modes, it's a must have game for VB fans.

BELOW: Two very rare display cartridges, these have printed labels stating they are for demo purposes only, and originate from a large US department store.



ABOVE: Mario Adventure (aka VB Mario Land) was originally to be released alongside VB Mario Land and was in development since the early days of the VB's existence. This picture is particularly early and shows a top view, Zelda-Style playfield, with Mario Walking towards a chest which has a diamond and candies on top of it.



THE LOST BIG BROTHER: VIRTUAL BOY

This article couldn't have come to fruition without the help of Holland's **Ferry Gronenwijk**, a self-confessed Virtual Boy addict and the world's leading authority on his many mysteries and forgotten games for the console.



ABOVE: *Bounds High*, packed full of bubbles and life blocks to bounce off of.



ABOVE: Proof of Konami's commitment to VB, *Doroseum*, which looks incredibly bland.



ABOVE: *Dragon Hopper*, a top-down RPG game from Nintendo.



ABOVE: *Nika Chan Battle*, which looks just a bit like the 8-bit classic, *Knot in 3D*.



ABOVE: *Out of the Deathmount* (?)



ABOVE: *Mario Adventure*, nice graphics, but can you spot Mario?

About a year before the machine's launch, rumours of a futuristic 32-bit console emerged from Nintendo. It was with growing excitement that information leaked on what would be some kind of virtual reality console. Its creator was the father of the Gameboy, Gunpei Yokoi, a man who's previous successes granted him a free hand in the R&D labs of Nintendo. Gunpei's intention was not to replace the Gameboy, but to create a whole new kind of gaming experience. Nintendo really had become a buzz word of the time, but no other company had tried to implement the ideas of the game into games of their own. Nintendo's president, Hiroshi Yamouchi, believed in the idea, and commanded other R&D departments to design games for the new machine. By Summer 1994, the console was complete. Gunpei worked hard on the software, creating both *Mario Tennis* and *WarioLand* for the format. Soon it would be time to see what the public thought of his invention.

The Virtual Boy was unveiled to the press on the 15th of November 1994, at Nintendo's own show held in Tokyo, the Showstival Exhibition, or Spaceworld 1994. It was greeted by Japanese gamers with some curiosity, as the machine it seemed was a blatant attempt to bridge the gap between Nintendo's other consoles of the time, the Super Famicom and the Gameboy. Despite Nintendo's huge following in Japan, it was significant that the Virtual Boy was not heralded as a breakthrough machine. Nintendo brought the machine to the following Computer Entertainment Show in Las Vegas. Unfortunately the press didn't know what to make of the Virtual Boy, with quotes in magazines of the time ranging from, "the graphics look bad", to, "This is the first attempt at true 3D gaming". The mixed reactions did little to quash Nintendo's enthusiasm for the machine. On the 21st of July 1995, the Virtual Boy was released in Japan, with the US ship out following soon after on the 14th of August. There were four games available at launch, *Mario's Tennis*, *Red Alarm*, *Telebomber* and *Galactic Pinball*. Nintendo's own publicity machine went fanatical into overdrive, promoting the machine as the ultimate handheld, primarily thanks to its use of batteries. The unit itself uses a 32-bit RISC chip to power two hi-res monochrome red/LED displays. When viewed simultaneously through the goggleshaped eyeshield, this produces an excellent 3D effect. There are stereo speakers, and connections for a link cable, though the cable was never actually released.

During the machine's lifetime, a total of twenty-two games were released for the system, the most highly rated of which are *Wario Land*, a classic Nintendo platformer which uses the 3D capabilities to good effect, *Space Invaders*, an all new 3D version of *Tetris*'s ancient classic, and *Mario Clash*, an incredibly tricky arcade puzzle game. Despite the good software, the gaming press hated the Virtual Boy, berating the red-only graphics, and uncomfortable play position. Soon there were complaints from parents, who's children were getting headaches after using the machine for prolonged periods. Then there was the price, which at \$79.95 in the US was to say the least, optimistic. Nintendo's own marketing department didn't help, with US TV advertisements not even carrying any screenshots of the games. With Nintendo's key development staff going up for the release of *Ultra 64* (N64) the Virtual Boy was left struggling for its truly killer app. Slow sales convinced third party developers to leave well alone, and the VB's fate was sealed. Nintendo had predicted sales of some 1.5 million units by the end of 1995. In reality 770,000 units were actually sold. While those sales may not seem that bad for what now seems a novelty console, Nintendo deemed the project a failure, and canned all work currently in development for the machine. These included titles such as *GoldenEye 007*, *Zelda*, *Metroid*, *Wario Kart* and *Mario Land*. For worse than this was the effect it would have on the staff within Nintendo's Japanese HQ. Early signs of what would happen could be seen at the Nintendo Spaceworld show in 1995. The Virtual Boy display was pushed into the furthest corner of the exhibition hall. Gunpei Yokoi was on hand to demonstrate his console, and enthusiastically did so for anyone who passed by. To see this great man pushed from the limelight, was the company's way of humiliating him. Hiroshi Yamouchi is a very proud man, long admired for how few bad business decisions he makes. The Virtual Boy had embarrassed him and Nintendo, and so a few weeks later, Gunpei Yokoi was unceremoniously fired.

There the story of the Virtual Boy ends, or does it. The system has become highly collectible, particularly considering how recently it was discontinued. Its unusual visual style brands the machine an oddity, like the Vectris or Adventurevision. While the machine can still be acquired relatively cheaply, some of the rarer games for the system are now fetching incredible prices, and it can't be long until we see Virtual Lab or VB Gundam going for over a thousand dollars. Indeed, it is this insatiable desire for new software which has stimulated the Virtual Boy collecting scene.

There is an incredible amount of information on games which were never actually released for the Virtual Boy. While some Japanese third party companies, like Hudson, Geocities, and T&E released games for the console, it seems many others were intending to release titles before the plug was pulled. Most prominent of these has to be GoldenEye, as pictures of the game can be found within the packaging of the US machine. Rumours of two particular unreleased Nintendo games have been rumoured for years. Indeed, some even thought that *Dragon Hopper* and *Bounds High* were actually the same game. Finally pictures have been unearthed proving otherwise. The games were to be the lead titles in Nintendo's second generation of software, and both were sent to Japanese game magazines for preview purposes. *Dragon Hopper* is a role playing game, while *Bounds High* is an action puzzle game, with quite a lot in common with the British 8-bit game, *Bounder* by Gemin. While Nintendo's early work on VB *Zelda* and *Mario Kart* has yet to be found, there are now pictures of *Mario's Adventure*, which appears surprisingly polished. The game seems to mix traditional Mario style platform action with top down RPG elements. The number of rumoured titles is actually incredible, but it's the Nintendo titles which are the most exciting, and also the most unlikely to ever make it into the public domain. Screen shots of *G-Zero*, the VB answer to the SNES classic, *F-Zero*, have been discovered, though by appearance the game seems to have more in common with *Starfox* than racing. To confuse matters further, another Nintendo sourced racing game titled *VI Racers* was in development, and shown to the press before the release of the machine itself. The game featured a cockpit-view of the action, and was ideally suited to the Virtual Boy's architecture. It is possible that this game was later renamed, as there are further rumours of a third racing title called *Zero Racers*. *Virtual Tetris*, or *V Tetris*, as released in Japan, is completely different to the 3D Tetris released in America. However the American Tetris was going to be released in Japan under the title *Polygo Block*. It was shown in playable form at the Famicom Spaceworld 1995 show, so prototypes bearing this name are almost a definite. Enter Hudson, and while their *Bombberman* puzzle game was a welcome addition to the VB's official back catalogue, their long awaited VB *Bombberman* does exist somewhere in prototype form. While offering yet more of the same *Bombberman* maze action, the 3D visuals are used to make bomb blasts go up into the sky. The treasure chest of missing VB titles is slowly revealing itself, let's hope we get hold of some actual prototypes soon.

The Virtual Boy will always remain a highly collectible machine, and while not Gunpei's finest hour in terms of sales success, it certainly exemplifies his ingenuity. The greatest creators in the games industry have always been prepared to take big risks. Unfortunately Gunpei gambled against the wrong man. I doubt we will ever know whether Mr Yamouchi regrets letting him go, or whether the tragic circumstances of Gunpei's death could have been avoided. One thing is for sure, Gunpei deserves his place as a gaming legend, alongside his pupil Miyamoto. You also have to wonder whether Yamouchi would treat Shigeru Miyamoto quite so unfairly.

OUTRO

Ah well, finally time to sign off from another issue, and time to think reflectively about Nintendo. As our previous pages document, Nintendo is a company with a long history, and while the success of the Famicom and it's sequels have turned the company into a

household name, this change in fortunes is down to one man, Hiroshi Yamouchi. Us Western gamers may view his decisions as hard, even militaristic, but his achievements can only be admired. His attitude to business continues unchanged, at this years E3 show, he announced that if the press weren't impressed by Gamecube and its games, he would scrap the whole project. It seems we have no choice but to love Nintendo. Today's Nintendo is weaker than it was, thanks to the unfair loss of Gumpel Yoko left. But Gumpel's legacy will live on, and thanks to the enthusiasm of retrogamers across the globe, his memory will never die.



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