

RETROGAMES

WORLD EXCLUSIVE

Read the full story of this incredible missing game inside

FACEBALL ON VIRTUAL BOY

Five years after our discovery of Mail Plane on the Vectrex comes our second major world exclusive. Rumoured to exist for many years, we finally get our hands on the only known Prototype in existence. If that wasn't exciting enough, the game seems to be complete, so we give it the full review treatment.

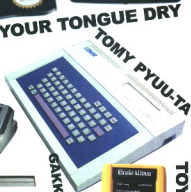


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World of Nintendo - Faceball Discovered for Virtual Boy



When you think about it, there aren't many consoles which have lived for such a short period as the Virtual Boy. Even the Neo Geo Pocket held out longer than Gunpei Yokoi's first Nintendo project. Perhaps that's the reason why the format has been so shrouded in mystery, a plethora of missing games on which dedicated fan-sites have attached themselves like leeches. It's easy to see why people get excited, the Virtual Boy is like no other console ever released. Possibly it's lack of a true "killer-app" is reason why there is belief that a truly ground breaking game is lying in wait somewhere as a prototype. The Virtual Boy community is a committed one, with rare titles like Virtual Bowling (see issue 14) now fetching over \$1000.

This very magazine is also guilty of getting swallowed up by excitement over missing titles, last issue we pictured G-Zero, Nintendo's ill-fated racing game, and Super Mario Bros, a title so incomplete the screenshots look empty. Nobody is quite sure where all those pictures and snippets of info come from, perhaps they start on an art program in someone's bedroom, like that old screenshot in Crash of the trailer in Lunar Jetman.

With this cynical view of the Virtual Boy scene, it was with some scepticism that I greeted the news that a friend had managed to secure a genuine missing prototype. Not only that, but it was a game I'd heard of, one of those titles which had been hanging around on "un-released" lists of games for many years. When the cartridge finally arrived, it actually worked, and not only that, this is the most complete prototype I've ever seen.

As you've probably guessed by the title, front cover, and the pictures on the page, the game was Faceball by Bullet Proof Software.

On inserting the game and turning the system on you are greeted with the familiar Japanese warning, and auto-pause options. These are accompanied by mysterious sounding music. A quick press of the start button and the Bullet Proof Software logo is displayed in satisfying 3D effect. Then the intro, possibly one of the best of all VB games (I'm handy if you're trying to take screenshots) while start drops the map into the centre of the screen. At the top of the screen, the timer sits in the middle, if it gets to zero before you have completed the level it's game over. This is a game without lives, one bad level and it's all over. You will also find your racer situated at the top of the screen, though range is limited. If you can see the enemy on your radar, you can probably see him in the main screen of the game, however, if there is a wall in between you and him, then it certainly helps. There is also another read out at the top of the screen, telling you how many enemies there are to kill.

Button "A" turns the lights off, ideal for sneaking up on a bad guy, while button B activates your bonus weapon. Despite extensive play, I have only located one bonus item, which simply speeds you up, this can be vital with some of the more sneaky enemy types. Pressing the fire buttons (triggers on the controller) throws sphere-like bullets directly in front of you. These do not bounce off walls, and range is limited, so you either have to shoot nonstop or aim very carefully.

The mazes start simple, but get far more complicated. Some walls can be shot away, these flash on and off to distinguish them from the rest. There are other transparent walls, which just have a polygon framework. It's very annoying when you have ten seconds left to destroy your last enemy, and can see him through the bullet-proof glass. Then there are the enemies, of which there are twelve different types (though I have yet to find all of them) with each acting in a different way. Like "Bound", who'll knock into you and damage you that way, or "Shieldman" who hides behind his metal shield before peeping out to fire. Then there's "Ghost" who'll teleport just before you are about to shoot him, and of course "Invisible", who's, well, invisible, apart from his shadow. (?)

So, basically, the premise of the game is to search out enemies as quickly as possible and destroy them before the time runs out. Scrolling is average to say the least, and very similar to In-Mouse. Walls kind of slide up the screen rather than slide past you as they should. That's not to say it makes the game unplayable. You'll spend most of your time running around trying to find the enemies, usually with the map displayed in the centre of the screen. It shows where you are and has an arrow pointing in which direction you are travelling, so is brilliant at getting you to the desired location quickly. Once you've found the enemy, it's just a case of blowing him up and you are done. You do have to cope with incoming fire, though you can shoot at enemy fire too. Scrolling is pretty patchy, the spheres you fire move between you and the target in huge chunks, and when approaching an enemy from a distance, don't expect to see him sit you are close, he'll then pop up in the middle of the screen like fresh toast. Of course, it's easy to pick holes in the presentation, but these faults don't actually effect the gameplay. Sound is excellent, with an adrenaline fuelled theme which keeps the action tense. Activate your speed up and the theme speeds with it (aka Mario Kart).

Progressing through the levels introduces more varied enemies, and more devious mazes. Early levels seem to give you plenty of time, but before long it's a race to reach the final enemy before time runs out. Satisfaction is guaranteed if you can track down, then shoot the last enemy with only a second left.

In conclusion, Faceball is a strange game, Japanese in style and simplicity, it constantly reminds me of C64 Future Sports game Dribblazer, rather than a first person shooter. Perhaps Wolfenstein with its sparse mazes is Faceball's closest relative. The two main modes don't offer any variety. Arena simply allows you to take one of the other characters through the levels. Originally this mode was supposed to be the multi-player mode, but when Nintendo decided not to release the VB Link up cable, Bulletproof decided to pull the plug on the game - despite it being finished. Personally I think the single player content is more than enough to have warranted a release, so timing possibly played a part. The game was finished at the end of 1995, just as the VB was being shelved.

Overall, I'd say it's a good game, far better than the repetitive In-Mouse. If I'm honest, my initial thoughts were that it was very poor, but it's one of those games which grows on you. The difficulty curve isn't quite steep enough, but when you get to those later levels, you panic as the timer sinks to zero. It's hard not to like a game which only gives you one life. **Jace Rates 7/10**



Other Missing Virtual Boy Games



Legend of Dragon Hopper Like Faceball, Dragon Hopper (along with Bounds High) has long been rumored to exist in prototype form. Indeed, search hard on the net and you can find over fifty different screenshots of the game in action (left).



However, nobody it seems actually has the cartridge. There is a sighting though, in 1999 someone was showing off with it at the E3 Exhibition in the US. No doubt it'll marl it's head when it's ready to be sold. Both Dragon Hopper and Bounds High were first party Nintendo games, intended as the second wave of titles which would push the machine into more homes. It is unlikely that a top down arcade adventure like Dragon Hopper would have created more Virtual Boy devotees.



Goldeneye Unlike DH, Goldeneye only ever had one screenshot printed in a promotional flyer. Probably the work of an artist rather than a programmer, but fingers crossed.





The first thing you see when you start up the game, the Bullet Proof Software logo. The company is most famous for bringing Tetris to the Gameboy.



The Stage Select screen, moving left and right on the joystick rotates the different stages into view.



Ok, got to the corridor, hang on, it's a "Shot Me" with his beady eye fixed on me. The target centres around him automatically.



Ahhh, I'm hat. That's it, game over. No extra lives, no continues, it's straight back to the start screen. How refreshing!



This is a glass wall, you can see the enemies you are after through it, but you can't fire at them. These would have been a great feature in the multi-player version of the game.



My favourite enemy, Shieldman. His Metal shield is impossible to destroy, and he sneakily peeks out from the side to fire at you. It's very hard to get behind him too, as he'll turn holding his shield as you do. In the end you just have to be patient.



Hard to capture on Camera, this is the intro sequence to the game.



Into the game proper, and the walls of the maze are made up of shaded rectangles. Now, where is the enemy.



He's making a run for it, no problem, I'll just give chase. He's heading into a dead end anyway.



Hydra, waiting for me. He's easy to take out but prefers to hide and wait for you to find him. This time he's behind a flashing wall.



Vampire, nice name, but like most of the enemies, doesn't look anything like what he's called. He's fast, and fires incredibly quickly. When you manage to hit an enemy, the word HIT appears underneath him - Handy!



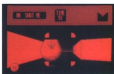
Berserker really is Berserk! He'll chase after you and bounce off of you, knocking you sideways as he goes. He's fast too, so your best to chase him down a dead end then fire at him like hell.



The main start screen, which is animated into place with a happy faceball bouncing along the top. There are two main options, Normal and Arena.



Calling up the map screen displays your position, and the position of the enemy, he's the dot in the bottom corridor.



He's changed his mind, and decides to turn and fire back at me. Unfortunately my camera fails to pick up his fire hitting me.



Bonus shields, the only reward for taking out your enemies. These are collected and traded for extras.



The more enemies you need to destroy, the harder it is to stick to the time limit. You can take around ten hits from enemies, so it's the timer which will more than likely make it game over.



After each round you are awarded points for each of the enemies you destroyed, more complicated foes are worth more points. You'll also be awarded bonus points for the time you have left, but don't expect to have much, after this round I had just one second!



The Enemies are more varied than they look, each with its own way of attacking and moving. I have yet to meet Wrath.