

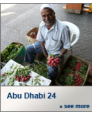
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Nintendo's 'worst' console wins some new admirers

Matt Kwong

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ABU DHABI // The 3D stereoscopic goggles brought on headaches and nausea, and the awkward headset caused sore necks and the monochrome red display led to eye strain.



The collector Mohammed Omran using his vintage Nintendo Virtual Boy game system at his home in Sharjah. **Pawan Singh / The National**

When Nintendo's experiment with virtual reality – the Virtual Boy video game system – proved a commercial failure, the Japanese manufacturer's critics were hardly shocked.

Thirteen years after its inauspicious debut, however, the system is suddenly attracting shoppers in the UAE.
Video game retailers emptying a warehouse in the Rashidia area of Dubai last month discovered a long-lost shipment of 100 units, which collectors believe to be the last of their kind still sealed in original factory boxes.

"This product was just left years ago and nobody knew it was in stock," said Vijay Chandrabota, the purchasing manager for Geekay Games in Dubai. "For me, it was dead stock. I didn't even know that this Virtual Boy existed until we found it."
Electronic games enthusiasts such as Mohammed Omran snatched up two consoles. Like others, he had believed brand new models were impossible to locate because the system was discontinued in the 1990s; unexpectedly available, he calculated, they could be worth many times their face value.

"I was chasing it in all the shops and all the markets in Dubai Khour, but everything was always vanished," said Mr Omran, a 38-year-old electrical engineer from Sharjah. "It's not an easy system to find."

Considered one of the rarest and most ill-conceived pieces of game hardware ever, the Virtual Boy was launched in 1995 but quietly shelved a year later amid reports of migraines and dizziness, apparently caused by excessive use.

Nintendo moved only 770,000 units during the machine's brief lifetime, falling far short of projected sales of three million. When the company scrapped plans to release the product outside Japan and North America, consoles in mint condition became scarce.

In a market dominated by so-called "next generation" systems such as Sony's PlayStation 3, their new-found popularity in the UAE has surprised shop managers, who wonder at the appeal of a mid-1990s flop.

"One customer bought three from us," said Layakath Ali, the Dubai operations manager for the Geekay Games chain. "Maybe a lot of customers are selling them on eBay. There are big local collectors here always asking about Virtual Boys but most have never heard of this system."

Geekay Games's Abu Dhabi Mall store sold its stock of the system in a few weeks. More have been bought at branches elsewhere in the UAE; the buyers are thought, in some cases, to have an eye on the resale value of what has become an improbable collector's item.

Auctioned online, an unused model in factory packaging would fetch a price that made the Dh99 (US\$27) selling price in UAE shops seem a bargain. According to some retro gaming hobbyists, even a second-hand unit in good condition could fetch over Dh1,200.

Yet the Nintendo relics uncovered in Rashidia were earmarked for the rubbish dump until Mr Ali salvaged them.

"[The shipment] was under some old cartons," he said. "There were lots of customers looking for Virtual Boys last year and I told them we didn't have any. I remembered collectors who wanted to have this one, so I could not say it was dead stock."

In his pursuit of the device last year, Mr Omran said he tracked down a used Virtual Boy for sale online, but backed down from buying it when he saw the price, already several hundred dollars for a second-hand model.

"It was too much," said the collector, who has a collection of retro video games merchandise valued at Dh20,000. "It's hard to find this system in good quality. You would be lucky enough if you can find an old [Virtual Boy] game itself for US\$200, like Space Invaders."

When Mr Omran learnt that 100 pristine Virtual Boys were in the country, he leapt at the opportunity and quickly bought his pair, the second for spare parts as backup for the first.

"We here in the UAE are lucky enough to get some units," he said. "You can find it on eBay on the US markets for maybe US\$100, but it will not be new with a box."

Mr Omran's brother, Hassan, also purchased a system, but freely admits that although he is also a collector, he did so as an "investment".

"I had some local friends who are also Nintendo collectors and they asked me, 'Can you get me one?'" said 23-year-old Hassan. "But you know if you want to spend more than two hours playing on it, your neck will be sore. It's really cool, but I don't want to use it. It was Nintendo's worst invention."

Design flaws were a major factor in the device's initial failure to make an impact. Last year, PC World magazine listed the Virtual Boy as the "fifth-ugliest product in tech history".

In order to play, it was necessary to immerse the face in a cumbersome head mount to block out external distractions while mirrored lenses broadcast 3D graphics. The effect reportedly gave some players blurred or double vision. Some were baffled that gameplay displayed only in bright-red LED, presumably because the use of other colours would have been too costly – and headaches were common among those who played to excess.

Stickers on the packaging even warned of the danger of "permanent eye damage" and Nintendo advised players not to peer into the visor for intervals exceeding 15 minutes. A note on the box read: "Eye Advisory – for players seven years and older." Christian Radke, 26, a student who runs the Planet Virtual Boy website in Germany, said: "People were afraid it would hurt their eyes. It was a failed experiment. Many parents wouldn't let their children have one."

Mr Radke's Virtual Boy memorabilia, valued at US\$8,000 (Dh29,400) includes Japanese prototypes, accessories and original boxes. But he has never encountered a brand new system.

"A boxed Virtual Boy would cost at least 250 Euros (Dh1,281) on eBay.de," he said. "That one would not be new, though. I actually never saw someone selling a brand new one."

Told that local games shops were selling them at Dh99, Mr Radke said some of the 800 members on his online Virtual Boy forum might seek ways to buy cheap units from the UAE.

But according to Geekay Games, that will not be easy. The store does not sell merchandise online.

Hard-core collectors such as Mohammed Omran say acquiring all 22 games may be his next step. Obscure titles released only in Japan are worth several times more than the system themselves.

He is not looking to profit from the purchase, however.

"If you take this and sell it in the US, you will for sure make good money," he said. "But I'm a collector, I'm not interested in selling."

Although the dream of an all-embracing world of virtual reality was not fulfilled, Mr Radke said Nintendo's failed experiment still held "magical" appeal because of its innovative 3D technology.

As for suggestions that it was potentially harmful to users, Mr Ali from Geekay Games said he had suffered no symptoms.

"People said it was affecting eyesight but I'm not sure about that," he said. "I enjoyed playing [the game] Mario's Tennis daily and I have no headaches. I know actually that they say it is a big failure, but it's a good system to have."

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