

Virtual Boy

The Virtual Boy sits on a table top, and you simply lean over and peer into it. Dead casual and suave.



You may not look very cool, though, and you could get burgled while you're engrossed in a fantasy world.



He's obviously trying out some game we didn't see, by the look of delight on his coupon.



This is where the Virtual Boy was found, on the dockland outskirts of Tokyo.



The Hardware

Virtual Boy is based largely on a 32-bit NEC processor. Sadly, much of the processing time is eaten up displaying two on-screen images. This is necessary for the stereoscopic 3D to work and perhaps explains why Nintendo decided to show these games all lacking the

The Virtual Boy is here, but Nintendo 32 bit RISK?

The Virtual Boy, Nintendo's new 3D version of the Game Boy, was unveiled at the Nintendo Shoshinkai exhibition at the end of last year and jaws immediately dropped - for all the wrong reasons.

Shoshinkai is the group name given to all Nintendo's Japanese affiliates, retail outlets and third-party developers. Even the most loyal Shoshinkai members at the show, however, were a little disturbed by the launch.

The problem was largely software based. The actual machine is reasonably powerful, but Nintendo didn't have a single polygon in sight. Instead, they showed off three very conventional-looking games. Okay, so these games aren't finished, but they hardly inspired confidence about how they might turn out.

Nintendo were quick to point out that this was a show for developers and retail and that better software would be unveiled at CES in January. However, the general feeling at the show was that Nintendo had showed the machine far too early.

The Virtual Boy will arrive in Japanese shops in April. There's no confirmation of US or British launch dates yet. The machine is expected to do big business in Japan, where it will be aimed straight at the toy market. The British situation is more difficult, though, since the machine will have to be pointed in the direction of the console audience. Quite how they'll respond to Nintendo's mixture of high and low tech remains a mystery.

One other problem is the price. Nintendo's machine will cost nearly £200 if it ever sees the British sun, which means it'll be almost as expensive as a PlayStation. Doh! Third-party developers have yet to be announced, but at least two major firms are working on titles for the Virtual Boy. We can only wait and watch.

Queues of people either trying to get to the Virtual Boy, or get away from it after they've played.



The Shoshinkai show did have other delights to offer those disillusioned by Nintendo's new baby.



Laughing boy comes back for yet another go. Obviously a glutton for punishment. Nice hair though.



Gumpei Yokoi answers a few questions about his latest and weirdest creation.



The unit was not head-mounted as previously expected, but, in fact, sits on a specially tripod arrangement, ideally on a table top.

Nintendo also plan to release a shoulder brace, which sounds just a little over-the-top. You would look less than cool on the train.

The stereoscopic 3D worked a treat, the impression of depth (even on the 2D-style games shown) was pretty convincing. After prolonged play, however, we found that we had headaches, something Nintendo had wished to avoid.

The unit runs from batteries, giving more than seven hours play - not bad considering the amount of processing required. It can also be run from the mains, but this obviously limits the portability. As you can see from the photo, it looks a bit like those Yeemaster things from the 70s. Cartridges go inside the main unit and are about the size of a GameBoy cart.

The sound hardware is perhaps the most disappointing. We weren't given details, but it sounded very much like a GameBoy with improved sample handling to us. Some of the tunes were a bit annoying to say the least.

The joypad was the one truly impressive feature. A brilliantly ergonomic unit that featured two directional controllers and a huge surfeit of buttons. The joypad is attached by two cables to the headset, and feels perfect.

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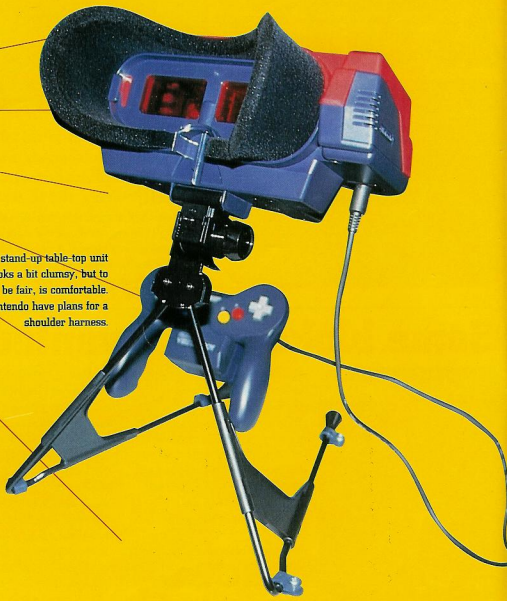


This is the Virtual Boy joypad, with two directional controllers!



And this is the front of the Virtual Boy. Viewmaster, or what?

The stand-up table-top unit looks a bit clumsy, but to be fair, is comfortable. Nintendo have plans for a shoulder harness.



The first batch of VB games

Poster section

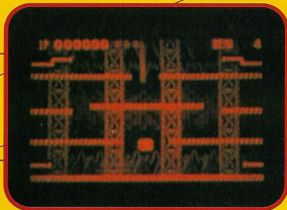


Teleroboxing

This one's a boxing game, much in the style of *Punch Out*, with special moves and giant robots doing the grappling. Pretty quick, but lacking much in the way of depth. The 3D effect was most evident here, but the game lacked spark or originality.

Mario Bros. V.B.

Eh? This is a conversion of the ancient *Mario Bros* coin-op, with lots of levels and a couple of new baddies, hardly the most exciting idea in the world. It plays okay, but the 3D was completely wasted, and indeed, only obvious on the title screen.



Pinball

Sharing the same perspective as *Behind The Mask* this pinball sim was perhaps the most disappointing of the three games shown. A very simplistic pinball game with few features and very poor ball movement. It was also very easy (but unfinished).



Some bloke who invented it



This fella is Gumppei Yokoi. To be frank, he's a bit of a genius. He's the technical mastermind behind Nintendo's most successful hardware.

Nintendo have Gumppei to thank for the Game Boy and the Super NES. Gumppei was also involved with the development of the original 8-bit NES.

Gumppei is more concerned with how well things work, rather than how quickly or

flashily. The Virtual Boy is an example of this philosophy. The battery life had to be at least seven hours, so out went full colour. A similar decision was made with the Game Boy.

Gumppei is widely respected for his ability to take other people's technology and turn it into something completely new.

He doesn't compromise and he's a lovely, friendly chap, so there.

