Cyberplay: Virtual Boy -- collect it, don't play it

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By Steven L. Kent

There's a secret to making money as a video game collector: Get rid of good games, and hold on to only the really bad ones.

It's true. Games that were hits on the Nintendo Entertainment System, such as Mario 3, Mike Tyson's Punch Out, The Legend of Zelda and Double Dribble, may have been fun to play, but they have absolutely no resale value. Why would anybody pay big money for them? You can find them in any used-game store. Specialized games, such as fishing and gambling, were not nearly as fun as Zelda, but they're scarce and worth a lot more money.

The same can be said about game systems. Atari sold more than 20 million Video Computer Systems (also known as the VCS and the 2600) -- nearly 10 times more units than its nearest competitor. Today you can find a VCS in most Goodwill stores selling for $5. On the other hand, the Vectrex, a stand-alone console with its own built-in monitor, sells for as much as $250.

Though it wasn't a lousy game system for its time, Vectrex played only black-and-white games with vector graphics. Vector graphics games are games in which everything is shown as lines, as opposed to fully drawn pictures. Asteroids and Battlezone are famous vector graphics games.

Manufactured by General Consumer Electronics, the system appeared during the video game craze of the early '80s and disappeared after less than one year on the market. If there is a modern-day equivalent to the Vectrex it's Nintendo's Virtual Boy, a short-lived system that many retailers are now clearing out of their inventory at the reduced price of $29.95.

Like the Vectrex, Virtual Boy is a stand-alone console with its own built-in, single-color light-emitting diode (LED) display. The entire system consists of a visor and controller perched on the top of wire-frame legs. To use Virtual Boy, you place the visor on a table and press your face into it.

Virtual Boy does not play virtual-reality games; instead, using dual optical displays, it fools players into believing they are seeing three-dimensional images. Images created by Virtual Boy's light-emitting diodes are shown in stereo and appear to pop out of the visor.

That's the good news.

The bad news is that the light-emitting diodes produce only one color: red. Some people complained that Virtual Boy's red graphics gave them headaches. Others said they couldn't see red images after a long session of playing Virtual Boy.

Another problem was the fact that in order to see the stereo effect, you have to adjust the focus on Virtual Boy before every game. I once watched a 10-year-old in a toy store play Virtual Boy without focusing it. When his mother called him away, 15 minutes later, he looked up and almost fainted, which is not an uncommon result of staring at blurry objects for several minutes.

Virtual Boy's biggest weakness is that nobody knew how to harness its strengths. No one seemed to know how to make games that took advantage of its 3-D imaging.

Virtual Boy comes with Mario Tennis, a wonderful game in which players control 2-D images of such Nintendo mascots as Mario the plumber and Princess Toadstool as they play tennis on a 3-D court. Mario Tennis takes a little getting used to, but once you catch on, it's great fun.

Most of the games for the Virtual Boy, however, aren't much fun. The worst Virtual Boy game, and probably the worst game I've ever seen, is Waterworld, from Ocean. If bad games become good investments, I suggest you pick up dozens of copies of this one. They'll be worth their weight in platinum! In Waterworld you drive a jet ski through enemy waters shooting bad guys and picking up good guys. There are no levels, no changes in scenery -- just more and more shooting and picking up.

Most Virtual Boy games suffer a different problem, however: They are nothing more than 2-D games with 3-D images. Panic Bomber is Bomberman with a 3-D look; Wario Land is a typical Mario side-scrolling game in which Mario's evil cousin Wario sometimes jumps into the background of the screen; Mario Clash is a remake of Mario Brothers, a game in which Mario and Luigi throw things at each other; and Teleroboxer is a boxing game in which your opponents' hands get bigger as they fly toward your face. Nothing special about any of them.

The strange thing is, even though its graphics are composed of just one color and most of its games are dull, I am very fond of the Virtual Boy. My only explanation is that the whole of Virtual Boy far exceeds the sum of its parts.

Taken in doses, Virtual Boy can be a pleasure. The American press never gave it a chance, and the technology-hypnotized Japanese gamers never forgave the system for its single-color display. Nintendo sold less than 100,000 Virtual Boys in Japan and only 250,000 in the United States.

I'm not claiming that Virtual Boy has more play value than a PlayStation or an N64, but I will go on record to say that it is unique among game systems, and due to its low sales figures, 10 years from now it will be a hot item with video game collectors.

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