

# 'SUPER AGENT' PUTS GAME IN YOUR FACE

By Deseret News | Aug 5, 1995, 12:00am MDT

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To get to know its latest entry into the \$15 billion video game market, Nintendo wants potential customers to "put their face in it."

The challenge the company faces in promoting its 3-D game system Virtual Boy is that it's difficult to get a feel for the game without actually peering into its table-top headset. The red light-emitting diodes (LEDs), cast against Virtual Boy's black background, create a cavernous environment and give the player a feeling of actually being inside the game. But that experience just doesn't translate well to a poster, a magazine ad or even a television commercial. So Nintendo is sending 27-year-old "super agent" game counselor Alan Belardinelli on a cross-country promotional tour leading up to the Aug. 21 nationwide release of the 32-bit game system. His mission: to put as many faces inside Virtual Boy as he possibly can.

"If you don't put your face in it, you don't have any way of knowing what's going on," Belardinelli said Monday during his stop in Salt Lake City, the third destination on the 20-city tour. "That's the challenge we face."

Belardinelli, who's just a big kid himself, found a receptive audience among the media and other invited guests here, as he did on his first two stops in Seattle and Portland.

"The kids are mesmerized by it," Belardinelli said, pulling his own face out of Virtual Boy momentarily during a demonstration in the back of the traveling Nintendo van Monday. "This game is phenomenal. It's the most significant advance in graphics since Pong ... far and away the best 3-D environment I've ever seen."

But Virtual Boy's black-and-red world has yet to generate so much excitement among local merchants.

"We're not impressed with Virtual Boy at all," said Gary Parker, regional manager for Master Player, a video game store with four Salt Lake County locations. "We're not even going to carry it initially because at the trade shows we've been to, we just didn't see a lot of interest in it. It's just another Game Boy with a red and black screen."

It won't be hard to find, though. Virtual Boy, priced at \$180, will be available at Toys R Us, Software Etc and other electronic stores and retail outlets, many of which have contracts to sell all Nintendo products.

"The one thing that's different about Virtual Boy is that it gives you the 3-D effect," said Jim Swistek, district manager for Software Etc, which has seven stores along the Wasatch Front. "But it's on a table top. Kids like to pull the system out and play 3-D on a big screen," which is not possible with Virtual Boy.

The video game market is now saturated with products claiming to offer an aspect of the "virtual reality" experience. But no company has succeeded in developing what the industry knows its customers want - an all-encompassing 3-D environment in which the players' head, arm and legs interact with the environment.