



The Game Boy Turns 30: Remembering the Perfect Harmony of Hardware and Software

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It's hard to imagine a world of video games without the Nintendo Game Boy, the simple but popular handheld that turns thirty years old this year. It single-handedly dominated the portable market, beating out more powerful and expensive competitors such as Atari's Lynx and the Sega Game Gear. The Game Boy was the perfect combination of well-designed hardware and excellent software.

Simplicity in Design

Nintendo launched the Game Boy in Japan in April 1989, followed by a July North American release, and finally a September 1990 European release. It was an immediate success in every region.

The Game Boy certainly wasn't the first handheld gaming device. It wasn't the most powerful either. But its longevity is undeniable.

The Game Boy also had a huge advantage over its chief competitor, Sega's Game Gear. That advantage was battery life. Four AAA batteries would give you approximately fifteen hours of gameplay, compared to three-to-five hours of gameplay using six AAA batteries for Game Gear. Over time, that would lead to huge savings in batteries.

The idea to limit the Game Boy's power turned out to be a brilliant move. Longer battery life meant that the Game Boy was the defacto handheld for long car rides, summer vacations, and late night gaming sessions before bed.

The choices made in the design of the Game Boy ensured that the end product was durable - it's been nicknamed a brick for a reason. Its design is simple and easy to use. And most importantly for parents, it was affordable, with a launch price of \$89.95 USD / ¥12,500.

Strong Launch Titles

A game console or handheld is only as good as its software, and good software will sell consoles. While the Game Boy's launch titles varied depending on the region, most of the titles were simple games: Tennis, Baseball, a Mahjong game in Japan called Yakuman, and Alleyway, a clone of Breakout. However, there were a couple of strong standout titles: Super Mario Land and Tetris.

Super Mario Land was Mario's first portable entry. Like it's home console predecessor, it's mainly a side-scrolling action game. However, the setting and characters are different, with Mario rescuing Princess Daisy, ruler of Sarasaland, from the alien villain Tatanga. Two of the game's twelve levels are forced scrolling levels, similar to a side-scrolling shooter. The rest of the levels are platforming levels. Overall, the gameplay was similar to the home console Super Mario Bros. but the levels, enemies, and gameplay were unique enough to make Super Mario Land a new series in the Mario franchise, exclusive to the Game Boy.

Tetris was the perfect complement to Super Mario Land. It's a simple puzzle game with a difficulty that quickly ramps up, encouraging the player to match different shaped blocks and clear lines. Tetris' strength is in its replayability. Tetris can be picked up and played for five minutes or an hour. It's widely considered one of the best Game Boy games.

Tetris was also a pack-in title for the Game Boy's release in the North American and European regions, meaning that it came with every Game Boy. The other launch titles may have been good, but Tetris was the Game Boy's killer app - the software that was so good it was deemed indispensable.

Dominating the 1990's

The Game Boy would continue to be relevant for over a decade, with Nintendo revising the system multiple times. The most notable of these was the Game Boy Color, which launched in 1998, and was more of an upgrade than a new system. The Game Boy would be produced well into the early 2000s, succeeded by the Game Boy Advance.

Despite its technical limitations, the original Game Boy managed to have a huge influence on the games industry. Aside from giving us the Super Mario Land trilogy and multiple Tetris titles, the Game Boy also gave us the Donkey Kong Land trilogy, a Metroid sequel, introduced the character Kirby via Kirby's Dreamland, gave us hundreds of pocket-sized monsters to catch via the Pokémon series, allowed us to undergo adventures in multiple Legend of Zelda games, and introduced us to hundreds of other titles. For a large generation of gamers, there are few things more influential than the original Game Boy.

What are some of your favorite memories and games of the original Game Boy?

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