Happy 30th B-Day, Game Boy: Here are six reasons why you're #1

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- Now you're playing with power… portable power!
  Andrew Cunningham
- Best-selling games for the original Game Boy (various sources): #1 – *Tetris* – 35 million copies.
- #2 – *Pokemon Red/Blue/Green* – ~23.64 million
- #3 – *Super Mario Land* – 18.06 million
- #4 – *Super Mario Land 2: Six Golden Coins* – 11.09 million
- #5 – *Pokemon Yellow* – ~8.86 million
- #6 – *Kirby's Dream Land* – ~5 million
- #7 – *The Legend of Zelda: Link's Awakening* – ~3.83 million
- #8 – *Dr. Mario* – 2.08 million (in Japan)
- #9 – *Wario Land: Super Mario Land 3* – 1.59 million (in Japan)
- #10 – *Kirby's Dream Land 2* – 1.49 million (in Japan)

Thirty years ago this week, Nintendo released the Game Boy, its first handheld video game console. Excited Japanese customers snatched up the innovative monochrome handheld by the thousands, which retailed for 12,500 yen (about $94 at 1989 rates) at launch—a small price to pay for what seemed to be an NES in your pocket. Nintendo initially offered four games for the new Game Boy: *Super Mario Land*, *Baseball*,

Alleyway, and *Yakuman* (a mahjong game), but the number of available titles quickly grew into the hundreds.

Later that year, the Game Boy hit the US at $89.99 with a secret weapon—*Tetris* as its pack-in game. Selling over a million units during the first Christmas season, the Game Boy proved equally successful in the US, and that success was by no means short-lived: to date, Nintendo has sold 118.69 million units of the original Game Boy line (not including Game Boy Advance) worldwide, making it the longest running dynasty in the video game business. So in honor of the Game Boy's twentieth *(Editor's note:* now thirtieth!) anniversary, we give you six reasons why the Game Boy dominated the handheld video game market during most of its astounding multi-decade run.

Enlarge / In a rare public discussion at DICE 2015, Alexey Pajitnov talks about pentominoes (and other origins of *Tetris*.
Sam Machkovech

1. *Tetris*

It’s common pop-marketing knowledge these days that every new hardware platform needs a “killer app” to truly succeed. In the Game Boy’s case, *Tetris* filled that role perfectly.

Alexey Pajitnov‘s block-stacking classic was easy to play in short sessions, and its simple graphics and mostly non-action gameplay proved perfect for the Game Boy’s limited screen capabilities. (If you’ll recall, the first Game Boy had a slow LCD response time, which translated to blurry “ghosting” during movement in action games.) Nintendo of America’s management made a gutsy and intelligent move to pack in *Tetris* with its new handheld instead of a proven name like *Super Mario Land*, and that move proved essential to the Game Boy’s long-term success.

Tetris didn’t start with the Game Boy, of course (Pajitnov created it for the PC in 1985), but the Game Boy made it mainstream. Ultimately, *Tetris* proved so popular that it quickly drove sales of Nintendo’s handheld console into the millions. *Tetris*‘s grown-up gameplay also attracted adults to Nintendo’s new platform, expanding Game Boy’s potential audience beyond the usual adolescent NES set.

2. Battery Life

The original Game Boy boasted anywhere from 10 to 30 hours of battery life on four AA batteries, according to different sources (the more generous estimates came from Nintendo itself at launch). Nintendo achieved this feat of longevity by using a non-backlit monochrome screen and a low-power 8-bit processor in its first handheld. By contrast, Nintendo’s competitors were obsessed with color backlit LCD displays and more beefy processors that made their units into battery guzzlers. The NEC TurboExpress, Sega Game Gear, and Atari Lynx only managed to squeeze out 2-5 hours of play time on 6 AA

batteries, which could prove quite expensive for their owners over time.

From a hardware design standpoint, Nintendo's first concern with the Game Boy always seemed to be battery life. It makes sense, because an electronic device's portability is directly related to how long you can use it without being tethered down by a power cord. So when it came to adding color to the Game Boy line, Nintendo took its sweet time—nine years, in fact. Why did it take so long? Nintendo wisely waited until it could provide a low-cost, low-power color LCD display that would not only keep the cost of the Game Boy Color low, but provide it with a long battery life comparable to its earlier monochrome cousins.

Ultimately, Nintendo's obsession with battery efficiency proved pivotal. While the Game Boy's early competitors possessed technologically superior displays and more processing power, consumers chose the Game Boy in large part because of the lower cost of operation (fewer batteries to buy) and greater portability afforded by its economical battery usage. Before long, the color power hogs drowned in Nintendo's wake while the Game Boy captured the portable gaming market.

3. The Nintendo Brand

In addition to battery life, the Game Boy had a major advantage behind it that its competitors lacked: a monster brand name—Nintendo—that dominated 80% of the video game market. Sure, Atari was Atari—once a video game giant, but by the late '80s it was a tarnished shadow of its former self. Sega's success in the home console wars was still brewing, and NEC's relatively low profile and short history in the video game business didn't resonate with consumers.

By contrast, Nintendo's 8-bit home console, the Nintendo Entertainment System (and the Famicom, its Japanese

counterpart), found itself near the peak of its popularity between 1989 and 1991—key years in the handheld wars. Consumers on both sides of the Pacific trusted the Nintendo name to deliver a high quality gaming experience. They knew they could count on Nintendo to provide world-class first-party software for the new console year after year, especially thanks to an enviable set of popular franchises like Super Mario Bros., Zelda, Metroid, and Kid Icarus.

Perhaps more importantly, Nintendo also brought to the handheld a dedicated group of skilled third party developers who knew they could rely on the Game Boy as a strong platform for their software. Plentiful third party support meant plentiful titles, which is always good news for the long-term health of any game system.

4. Price

The Game Boy retailed for $89.95 at launch in the US. Compare that to its closest competitors at their launches: the TurboExpress sold for $249.99; the Game Gear, $149.99; and the Lynx, $189.95. Nintendo could afford to offer the Game Boy at a lower price primarily because of the unit’s less expensive non-backlit monochrome LCD screen. The Game Boy also gained an advantage over its rivals in total cost of ownership: as previously mentioned, Nintendo’s handheld cost less to operate over time due to its more conservative use of disposable batteries.

Launch price wasn’t the only factor in Game Boy’s success. Over time, Nintendo continued to lower the price of its portable console as production costs decreased, keeping the Game Boy affordable and price competitive despite significant improvements in technology.

Enlarge / Nowadays, these gents need no introduction.
Andrew Cunningham

5. *Pokémon*

Tetris may have driven the public's ravenous early appetite for Game Boy, but *Pokémon* cemented it to legendary status. The monster collecting RPG for the original Game Boy sold a combined 20 million copies in the US and Japan and proved that the aging Game Boy platform was still relevant in the late 1990s. And having a new hot title for the handheld at the time proved especially important in the face of a new breed of portable platforms like the Neo Geo Pocket, Bandai Wonderswan, and Tiger Game.com that had learned a few tricks from Nintendo's portable wunderkind. Lacking an absolute must-have game like *Pokémon*, those new portable contenders quickly fell by the wayside.

Interestingly, *Pokémon*'s success kept more than just the Game Boy alive. 1996-2006 were lean years for Nintendo on the home console front. While the Nintendo 64 and GameCube didn't sell particularly well, sales of Game Boy and Game Boy Advance hardware remained strong, largely driven by the *Pokémon* craze.

In fact, after disappointing sales of the Nintendo 64, Nintendo decided to bring the blockbuster franchise to its ailing console. Sales of the N64 briefly tripled after the release of *Pokémon Stadium* in 1999. Even so, it wasn't enough to stay on top of the home console race. If Game Boy sales hadn't been so strong, it's possible that Nintendo might have left the hardware business entirely by now. So in some ways, *Pokémon* and Game Boy kept Nintendo afloat during tough times. Nintendo, and Game Boy, lived on to see another day.

6. Flexibility

Throughout its first two decades of history, the Game Boy was clearly a hardware franchise that would not sit still. As technology improved, Nintendo followed, regularly refreshing its handheld console to provide better battery life, sharper displays, and more compact form factors. As of 2009, Nintendo has released seven distinct models in the Game Boy series (all but one are completely backwards compatible with earlier units): Game Boy, Game Boy Pocket, Game Boy Light (Japan only), Game Boy Color, Game Boy Advance, Game Boy Advance SP, and Game Boy Micro. Within those seven models, Nintendo provided many color variations and even a few minor hardware revisions. Nintendo also released three home console adapters that allowed users to play Game Boy games on a TV set: Super Game Boy and Super Game Boy 2 (Japan) for the Super NES, and Game Boy Player for the GameCube.

[embedded content]
Today's kids don't know the first thing about *Kirby's Dreamland*, evidently. (We tried asking in 2018.) | Video shot and edited by CNE. Click here for transcript.

At the moment, Nintendo's dominance in the handheld gaming business continues with the Nintendo DS line of consoles. The Nintendo DS launched in 2004 with Game Boy Advance backwards compatibility as a major feature, making the DS a spiritual successor to the Game Boy line. Even with the DS firmly in the

spotlight, Nintendo still sells the Game Boy Micro, a compact version of the Game Boy Advance. So even now, the “Game Boy” name remains alive, although it’s on life support. Unfortunately, Nintendo chose to remove Game Boy Advance compatibility from its latest handheld, the Nintendo DSi. As we look ahead, the future of the Game Boy brand remains uncertain at best, grim at worst, but it has been one hell of a ride. Happy birthday, Game Boy. Next year, I’ll buy you a beer.

Sources

Listing image by Andrew Cunningham

http://arstechnica.com/gaming/2009/04/game-boy-20th-anniversary/