

I am drawn to quirky pop culture stories, facts and icons. I guess this syncs up with my ironic sense of humor. The greater the contemporary irony, the greater the impact on me. For this sculpture, I considered gimmicks that are part of historic computer gaming lore. My view of these gimmicks is that the good ones function like literary devices, creating a contextual connection with the user based on things like irony, satire and anthropomorphism. My theory is the better the contextual connection, the better the gimmick. My work, itself a gimmick, has two main components: one is ironic... a found object “machine” that hides its true purpose (which is a cereal bowl); and the other which is a mundane, everyday object (a cereal box) that has been reinvented and over-illustrated to pay homage to my favorite software gimmick of all time, DK Bongos. While the cereal inside the box subtly reveals my artistic gimmick, the box itself has been “redecorated” into a blatant reference to a well-known gimmick.

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Gimmicks

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In console gaming systems, products improve and evolve over time, creating extended life through successive versions. Sometimes these evolutions aren't completely linear, however. Instead, products occasionally deviate from rigid forward progress and offer their users some form of novelty interaction as a way of differentiating themselves and creating intrigue. These novel additions are frequently referred to as "gimmicks."

The whole point of the gimmick is to grab the interest of the user by being quirky or charming. Rather than extending the progression of the product, the whole point of the gimmick is to entice the user to stop for a moment just to play or have fun. It's like an odd but enjoyable pit stop in the middle of game; kind of like a flea circus alongside the autobahn. The gimmick doesn't change the path forward from start to finish, but it provides a memorable gaming experience, nonetheless. As a fan of the stupid and obscure, I personally enjoy a good gimmick.

To me, there is one memorable gimmick that will likely inspire generations to come. That gimmick (pictured below) is known as the DK (Donkey Kong) Bongos, an alternative, specialized controller for the Gamecube.



The DK Bongos were originally the basis for a simple Nintendo rhythm game called Donkey Konga. The original function of this controller was to mimic actual bongos with inputs corresponding to where the player touched on the pad in addition to a microphone to detect a clapping input. The gimmick with the DK Bongos came into play when the bongos became the primary controller for a platformer game called Donkey Kong: Jungle Beat, wherein this odd controller was intentionally substituted for a traditional controller. Platformer games refer to games like Mario, where you control a character through levels designed much like obstacle courses. With the precision needed in most games of this type, it's safe to say that it was not a genre meant for the bongos. The pure genius of appropriating a rudimentary device (a set of plastic bongos) to manage the complexity of guiding a character through successive levels of hazards made the DK Bongos super quirky and memorable as the gimmick standard bearer.

As an advocate for gaming I feel that there is an important point to make here. Often times gaming suffers the scorn of people that view it and decry it as mindless entertainment. My example of the bongos is a perfect counter to this perspective. Using the rudimentary device to manage a complex series of moves is a form of situational irony that engages me. It pulls me in because its absurdity pleases me. This is no different than situational irony in literature. One of the greatest ironic lines from Western theatre is from Richard III, when King Richard cries, "My horse! My horse! My kingdom for a horse!" The irony being that something simple (like a horse or bongos) has a significant impact on the bigger picture (a historical battle or Donkey Kong getting through an entire game).

If I were to rate all of the gimmicks known to the gaming world (which I'm fully capable of doing), I would give the bongos an 11/10. Not all gimmicks are created equal, however, and most don't hold a special place in my heart as do the DK Bongos. Rating gimmicks involves setting some basic criteria for consideration. Remember, a gimmick is something that deviates from normal logical game evolution. Gimmicks also are typically confined to a particular console rather than gaming as a whole. The power of the gimmick to hook the consumer is largely based on their console preference and their realm of experience - that's what make a hook work. To cut

across that, I have developed a system of review is based on three factors (what will come to be known as the PUN scale) - practicality (how the gimmick is implemented), usability (how well the gimmick functions), and novelty (whether the gimmick is interesting and creates a connection with its user). This will allow me to point to other gimmicks that have the potential to engage people in the same way as a literary device might (rivaling the bongos remains unattainable, however).

It might be said that Nintendo the crown prince of the gimmick. Gimmicks are part of their product identity and Nintendo devotees actually seek out where gimmicks are woven into the products.

The Zapper



PUN SCALE		
Practicality	Usability	Novelty
8/10	7/10	7/10

The Zapper was produced for the original NES (Nintendo Entertainment System) and was used for games like Duck Hunt, Wild Gunman and Hogan's Alley. Using the latest in 90s light box technology, the zapper let you shoot stuff on your TV like you never left the arcade. The Zapper was launched by Nintendo to make the NES seem more like a toy when the video game industry was going through a rough patch. The gimmick allowed for the development of ports for classic arcade games which utilized similar types of controls. The Zapper created a connection through its nostalgia which is ironic in a couple ways: 1) nostalgia for games that were still in arcades at the time being used to prop up a new industry that struggling; and 2) the technology was not forward compatible with future generations of TVs (TVs being another nostalgic past time that left The Zapper in the dust). PUN Score: 7.3/10

The Super Scope



PUN SCALE		
Practicality	Usability	Novelty
6/10	6/10	10/10

The Super Scope was Nintendo's follow up to The Zapper, this time designed for the SNES (Super Nintendo Entertainment System). When originally released, it was viewed as a beauty of a gimmick. It was described as a bazooka (and a light bazooka that). Now, as Nintendo upgraded their game system and decided to create a light gun design for it, they weren't content with just another pistol, instead opting to create a giant rocket launcher type design that more or less functioned like the original Zapper, but a bit harder to wield effectively. The absolute size and power of the Super Scope inserted to essentially replace a smaller gun (the diminutively named

Zapper) is a clear example of gaming hyperbole. The Super Scope's unwieldiness, however, added a lot to its charm and may even be considered to be a gimmick for an already existing gimmick. Perhaps for this reason, as game systems progressed, the light gun died out and hasn't really been seen in modern times at all, leaving our last taste of the home light gun to be distinctly bazooka flavored and full of interesting memories of Yoshi's Safari, a game where Mario technically had a gun. 7.3/10

R.O.B



PUN SCALE		
Practicality	Usability	Novelty
4/10	3/10	10/10

R.O.B (Robotic Operating Buddy) was a robot that helped to market the NES as a toy at a time where video games were a dying market. His prime function was serving as an artificial "Player 2" with a whopping library of 2 compatible game. Despite this, R.O.B is partially credited as saving and redeeming the video game market by infiltrating the toy aisle. Regardless of functionality, R.O.B.'s legacy is one that demands a high amount of respect. He has even made appearances in many of Nintendo's games as an homage to his role of the Robo Messiah. If ever there was an example of anthropomorphism in the gaming world, R.O.B. is it. The savior of gaming in the west, Plastic Robotic Jesus scores an honorary 10/10 (but on the PUN scale he's technically a 5.6/10).

Labo



PUN SCALE		
Practicality	Usability	Novelty
4/10	7/10	8/10

The Labo is an interesting case of creativity, education, discovery and 60 dollars spent on cardboard. The primary idea is creating attachments for your Switch that allow for new gameplay opportunities, such as the classic functional cardboard piano, or the ever amusing fishing rod. The software that comes with Labo kits even allows for custom programming so that you too can create a cardboard based abomination. The sky is seemingly the limit with Labo, as long as you have an endless supply of cardboard. Labo presents both a juxtaposition (high tech electronics and low tech cardboard integrated into one device) as well as an oxymoron (paper based electronics, a pairing of seemingly contradictory components). In summary, a Switch accessory that was literally just cardboard and some basic programming. 6.3/10

The Virtual Boy



PUN SCALE		
Practicality	Usability	Novelty
2/10	1/10	7/10

The Virtual Boy was a failed console to say the least. A head-mounted headache dispenser that clogs my nightmares with red and black. The system's main claim to fame was that all games on the system were fully in 3d, but the catch was that the display could only output black and red in order to create the illusion of depth. This added depth came at the heavy toll of migraines caused

by playing with the system for about 30 minutes. This gimmick was Nintendo's abomination, providing 3d gaming at a price...that price being constant headaches and games that could only be displayed in black and red. The Virtual Boy was actually Nintendo's paradox machine - presented as a method to bring players closer to the world of virtual reality only to make their real world hell via the physical pain they caused.

3.3/10

The Hey You Pikachu microphone



PUN SCALE		
Practicality	Usability	Novelty
0/10	0/10	3/10

Hey You Pikachu and its microphone can be characterized as a trainwreck of a game and a less than stellar implementation of a simple function. The concept behind the software was being able to talk to and play directly with Pikachu. While this sounds fine on paper, the microphone (and by extension the game), came with 2 major issues. The first of these issues being that of all the characters that could be featured in a game where the character talked, the makers chose one that can literally only say their own name. The second of the issues was simple, the microphone was of a poor quality (not to mention that Pikachu maintained his stubborn personality from the beginning of the anime series). This resulted in the following: 1. The mic only worked like, half the time, and 2. Even when it worked, Pikachu had a tendency to just, ignore what you asked him to do anyways. Hey You Pikachu only works in one way - as brutal satire using irony to critique games, users, Pikachu's integrity and the occasionally low threshold for engagement between the two. 0.1/10

While gimmicks can be viewed as novelties that are placed exclusively to be quirky and humorous, it seems that their real effectiveness can be assessed based on their ability to speak to the user at a more sophisticated level. The gimmick isn't the basis for forward movement in a game, but it does present an important point of connection. In this way, gimmicks are like literary devices. They rely to an extent on the user's familiarity with concepts and context, but mostly their ability to provide the user a cerebral connection to an "inside joke" or clear point of discontinuity. Whether they succeed in providing real novelty or not, gimmicks are the gems of the gaming industry because they go far beyond the idea of mindless game-play and engage the user at a more intellectual level.