

# Guide to Nintendo Shopping

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So you went out and bought yourself a Nintendo. Using the throngs of Christmas shoppers for cover, you snuck into the Toys 'R' Us and picked up one of those little video machines you've been coveting. "It's for my nephew," you muttered to the grinning clerk. "he's five." You then spent the holidays zapping Koppas and Poloboos on "Super Mario Brothers," knocking out Glass Joe and King Hippo on "Mike Tyson's Punchout," and perfecting your home runs on "RBI Baseball."

It was all great fun, but now you have a bad case of Nintendo thumb and are fed up with mindless punching and zapping. Is there nothing more? As a matter of fact there is—if you know what to look for. While most home video games require endless jumping, shooting and dodging, a few call for a fair measure of strategy and ingenuity. If you pick right, you can have many weeks of enjoyment without the tedium and repetition typical of most video games.

To my mind, the most interesting and challenging are the role-playing games, where your video persona evolves over time—"Dungeons and Dragons" for the Max Headroom generation. The theme is usually simple enough: A great calamity has struck and Our Hero (that's you) is humanity's last hope to bring back peace and prosperity. At first, you spend a lot of time getting the silicon knocked out of you. But as you travel through videoland, dispatching villains and making friends, you acquire magical swords, flasks of elixir and other useful items. You also learn when and where to go, what to pick up, which weapon to use against which adversary, how to find hidden treasures and, ultimately, how to defeat the Big Bad Dude.

Because good role-playing games take scores of hours to complete, avoid the great majority of games that destroy your progress when you switch them off. A few games use a lithium memory to preserve your persona; more common is the password: Keying in a multi-digit code will start your game where you left off. Stay away from games that lack one of these features or you may have to choose between defeating King Koopa and watching "L.A. Law."

The best games have great big worlds to explore, with lots of secret nooks and crannies, and with characters able to move along several axes. There are an amazing number of ways to hide things in a video world, and a good game will give you the best mental workout since Rubik's Cube.

Finally, very important is the "feel" of the game: the mix of graphics, music, sound effects, as well as any novel techniques for manipulating the characters. Unfortunately, most games mimic other games, adding nothing innovative and using poor graphics to boot. Particularly disappointing are the growing number of games based on recycled personal computer programs, which have all the zing of a stale marshmallow.

Three games set the standard. The first

is "Legend of Zelda" (Nintendo, \$44.99). The action in this memory game is divided between a very large surface world and a series of hidden labyrinths. As Link, an Arthurian child warrior, you must find the hidden pieces of the magic Triforce that will enable you to defeat the evil Gannon. If you buy into this silly premise, you'll find a game that challenges your skill and ingenuity, and really is a lot of fun. The graphics and sound are first rate and, as an important bonus, the cartridge contains a second game, even more challenging, once you complete the first. Incidentally, don't confuse "Zelda" with its lackluster sequel, "Zelda II, The Adventure of Link."

The second standard-setter is "Metroid" (Nintendo, \$29.99), a password game with a unique look and feel. The action unfolds inside the planet Zebes, the breeding ground for the evil Metroids, flying jellyfish that are preparing to invade the galaxy. One shudders at what might happen if they succeed. Fortunately, you are on the scene as Samus Aron. Samus must weave her way through a honeycomb of tunnels looking to destroy the Mother Brain (Ma B, to the cognoscenti), controller of the Metroids. Particularly ingenious are the various powers Samus acquires, and the ways she can use them to reach seemingly inaccessible places. This is one game you can't complete without careful mapping, so keep pencil and graph paper handy.

Finally, my own favorite is "The Legacy of the Wizard" (Broderbund, \$44.99), a password game that combines the best of sight, sound, complexity and diversity. The graphics are excellent; there are half a dozen different tunes; the obstacles require a fair balance of skill and ingenuity. Some of the puzzles are so ingenious, you can almost hear the programmer chuckle as you struggle to solve them. Like "Metroid" and "Zelda," "Legacy" stands out because someone obviously devoted a lot of time, effort and imagination to come up with something really new.

There are a number of other role-playing games—"The Goonies II" (Konami, \$34.98) and "The Battle of Olympus" (Broderbund, \$39.95)—that deserve honorable mention, as well as several excellent maze games that will send your head spinning, but that's a story for another day. Sadly, however, gems are hard to find, as manufacturers do an exceedingly poor job of disclosing basic game information on the package. With some 200 games on the market, at \$40 or more a throw, you can spend a small fortune looking for a game you really enjoy. It's wise, therefore, to befriend a family with small children who you can bamboozle into lending you their games. But watch out if one of these tykes should challenge you to a friendly game of "Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles": You'll get knocked flat on your software.

*Mr. Kozinski, a judge on the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit, uses his three small sons as excuses for his video-game forays.*