**Nitro Ball / Gun Ball (ガンボール) - Arcade (1992)**

If there’s anything Data East really excelled at, it was taking a fairly standard concept and adding in a new twist to make something entirely new. Boogie Wings is probably the best example of this, being a SHMUP that lets you leave your vehicle to take control of an assortment of other vehicles. If there’s any other game that illustrates this, though, it’d be this particular game. On the surface, it seems like a typically ordinary run and gun shooter, the sort of game seen in the past with games like Capcom’s <i>Mercs</i>, or Data East’s own <i>Heavy Barrel</i>. Still, it has enough of its ideas of its own that it’s still well worth checking out, and it makes an excellent example of the genre that stays exciting the whole way through.

Nitro Ball itself is apparently some kind of game show that involves two heavily armed guys blasting their way through hordes of mooks, collecting fabulous prizes along the way. A little like Smash TV, then, but a little cheerier, a little less violent, and a lot less RoboCop references. There’s a total of five different stages to blast your way through, with themes like “football” and “war”. Your goal on each of the levels is to move forward, blast the many enemies that get in your way, and score as many points as humanly possible, and the game offers plenty of ways to do so. Beyond that, there’s little to no plot, which, as always for games like these, is never really a complaint.

In terms of basic gameplay, Nitro Ball follows pretty closely to similar games from the era. You’ve only got one hit, three lives to a credit, and no way to evade attacks aside from moving around them, the old fashioned way. You begin each life with a weak machine gun and a supply of smart bombs, the use of which make your character unleash a spiral of powerful shots before finishing with a manly fist pump. Aside from the basic machine gun, you’ll also come across different special weapons, like flamethrowers, guns that shoot out a spread of rings, and a rapid-fire missile launcher that creates a straight line of heavy damage. You’ll also occasionally find an item that lets you turn into a spherical pinball, letting you smash through enemies and make your way into places you normally couldn’t before.

The major gimmick to Nitro Ball is that every level has an assortment of ramps, holes, targets that spell out words, bumpers, and spinners, the sorts of things you’d encounter on a pinball table. Most of these can be shot and destroyed, which will release point items, from gems all the way up to miniature mansions, and the occasional powerup. If you really want the big points, however, you’ll have to start playing the game like a real pinball machine. Basic mooks, when shot, will roll around the screen for a short time before dying, and if you line them up just right, you can make use of the various pinball features to score even more points. You can roll them into holes, bounce them off of targets, and roll them through spinners for massive bonus points. When you’re in ball form, you can also make your way up certain ramps you couldn’t otherwise reach for even more points.

Tying in with its pinball theme, the game places a pretty big focus on scoring, far more than most arcade games of the time, where score just usually led to bragging rights. Every stage has a small bonus area where you’ll be tasked with a certain challenge, like destroying a fleet of motorcycles within ten seconds. Should you accomplish these challenges, you’ll be showered with even more point items, as well as opening another path through the level. At the end of every stage, your overall score is tallied up, and should you reach a certain target, you’ll earn an extra life. Much like a real pinball game, you’ll also have a very small chance to earn another 1-UP, should a random number that’s chosen match up with the last two digits of your score. It’s not very likely, but it’s a nice touch. Overall, the pinball gimmick works pretty well, since you can choose to ignore it if you just want to play through the game, or focus on it if you really want to try and master it.

To be truthfully honest, aside from its pinball gimmick, Nitro Ball doesn’t do terribly much with the genre that hadn’t been done before at the time. However, it’s fantastically paced, always keeping you moving forward, never keeping you in the same place too long, which definitely makes up for a lack of originality. The game actually only clocks in at twenty minutes or less before the ending, and it’s definitely one of those games that feels like it ends just a little too soon – a rarity for a lot of arcade games. The pinball mechanics and scoring systems, however, mean there’s enough of a draw to jump right back in and try to do even better, with your character’s final reward being determined by your end score. Do particularly well, and you’ll end up becoming, inexplicably, President of the United States.

The game does a pretty great job of varying itself up with each stage, each of which has a distinct theme, much like a real pinball table. It helps add a lot of personality, like the way the football stage has its mooks dressed up as football players, or how the war stage has sandbags used for bumpers. The music, in typical Data East style, uses a lot of heavy synth guitar, and it usually tends to sound pretty great. Much like Smash TV, you’re continually pressed on by the host, who occasionally shouts out goofy things like “BINGO!” or “Yeah! Your chance to <i>match!”</i> Goofy as it is, it adds a lot of enthusiasm to the proceedings, which definitely makes the game much more of a joy to play.

It’s true that games like Nitro Ball have been done plenty of times before. Still, though, there’s few games of the genre that manage to stay so charming time and time again, which is where it really shines. Its unusual gimmick does enough to let it standard apart, while it’s got a pacing that keeps it fun the entire way through. For fans of the top-down run and gun genre, it’s definitely one that should be at the top of the list.