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1991. After reading and reading about the Super NES for almost a year, the system was finally a reality. It was here, now, and Braunle had one. He got it the day it was released, along with *Super Mario World*.

Braunle and I were both huge Konami fans, thanks to their library of fantastic arcade and NES titles. We had hoped they would make games for the Genesis, but at that point in time they were still an exclusive Nintendo licensee. When it was announced that Konami was one of the first companies that would be producing Super NES games, Braunle and I began to scour the magazines for announcements and pictures of the upcoming 16-bit wonders being cooked up in Japan by their programming wizards. Together we drooled over the preliminary screenshots of *Super Castlevania IV*, *The Legend Of The Mystical Ninja*, and most importantly to us, *Gradius III*. We both loved the *Gradius* series, despite only having played the NES versions of *Gradius & Life Force* and the Commodore 64 version of *Salamander*.

The news that *Gradius III* was going to be Konami's first release for the Super NES had us both jumping up and down with anticipation. One day, while walking through the mall after school, we were lucky enough to catch a glimpse of it: one of the stages was playing on an Electronics Boutique preview tape, and for the next few minutes we just stood there and stared at the screen, our eyes bulging from our sockets. Braunle even got behind the glass so he could try to hear the music. We walked away from EB more excited about it than ever.

A few weeks passed. Usually I would hitch a ride home with Braunle after school when his mom came to get him, but today he had band practice. I really didn't feel like hanging around school for a couple of extra hours, so I swallowed my pride, hopped on board the cheesewagon, and went home. A few hours later, I received a call from him. He sounded excited about something—unusually excited.

“Dude, you should have stuck around and gotten a ride home with me,” he said.

“Why? What's up?”

I could hear videogame music playing in the background, but I didn't know what it was. I strained to hear it, but it was so indistinct I couldn't make the tune out.

“We stopped at Wal-Mart on the way home. Guess what I got?”

That's when it clicked. Why else would he be so excited?

“You didn't!” I practically shouted. “It's out?”

“It just came out today! I had to talk my mom into letting me get it, and she finally said okay. It's **awesome!**”

My heart skipped a beat. I knew I had to get over to his place, pronto. Luckily, he was one step ahead of me. He'd already asked his parents if I could come over for a while to play the game and have dinner with them. All I had to do was ask my parents if I could go, and if they said yes, his dad would come by to get me.

My parents said yes, and within a half hour I was walking into Braunle's room. The Super NES was off, but the game was in the system, and the box was sitting right next to the TV. I picked it up and my eyes devoured every inch of it... that sweet logo, the beautiful cover artwork, the tantalizing story, those beautiful screen shots...



Just by looking at the box, you knew you were in for a treat.

And I was going to play it. I WAS GOING TO PLAY IT.

Braunle smiled, and without a word turned the power on. Immediately a white grid came up on the screen. “Is that normal?” I whispered. He nodded yes, but said nothing else. That's when a neon purple laser beam flashed across the screen and scrolled downward to reveal the Konami logo. SWEET.

Then there was nothing.

Suddenly two rows of lights lit up with a deep, resonating hum. The interior of a hangar bay slowly lit up as the music kicked in. Two docking clamps slowly descended from the unseen ceiling of the hangar bay. In their grasp was

the spaceship that we'd come to know and love, the pride of planet Gradius: the *Vic Viper*. It looked beautiful. The bottom of the hangar bay opened up, and the *Vic Viper* continued to descend. Then the scene switched to a side view of deep space, and the lower hull of a gigantic spacecraft. The *Vic Viper* was still descending, but then it stopped, the docking clamps disengaged and it was floating freely in space. The music faded away, and then, with a roar that shook Braunle's stereo speakers, the *Vic Viper's* engines ignited and it rocketed toward the right of the screen like it had been shot from a cannon. The scene changed again, to show a view of several planets, and the *Vic Viper* roared by overhead, descending toward the nearest one. At the same time, the *Gradius III* logo faded in. It solidified with a flash as a heroic fanfare played.

I forced my mouth to close at this point, half expecting Braunle to offer me a tissue to wipe up the drool. Instead, he handed me the controller. Despite the slight trembling in my hands, I pressed START... and the rest is history. I knew at that point that I had to get a Super NES, if for no other reason to own *Gradius III*. Sure enough, when I finally did get a Super NES almost a year later, *Gradius III* was one of the first three games I bought for it, along with *Super Castlevania IV* and *Contra III: The Alien Wars* (told you I was a huge Konami fan). I still have my system and my original copy of *Gradius III*, which will always be my favorite Super NES game of all time.

*Written by Rob Strangman. This excerpt from the book *Memoirs of a Virtual Caveman* is © 2008, 2014 SCAR Productions. Please do not distribute without the author's permission. Direct all inquiries to Rob at gradiusone@yahoo.com*

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