

# PREFACE

---

Like rock 'n' roll, comic books, and horror movies, video games have gotten a bad rap over the years from an assortment of well-intentioned folks, including parents, preachers, politicians, and other authority figures. During the early 1980s, C. Everett Koop, former surgeon general of the United States, went so far as to say that video games were hazardous to the health of children. And, like most kids of the time, I couldn't have cared less. All I knew was that I loved going over to various friends' houses and playing their Atari 2600s, Intellivisions, Astrocades, and other programmable game systems. Blowing up alien invaders, speeding around raceways, munching dots, piloting airplanes, and other such virtual endeavors were pure nirvana, with each game cartridge for each console holding the promise of a new adventure.

Growing up a video kid didn't appear to hurt my health, despite Dr. Koop's warnings. I still played basketball, explored the outdoors, rode my bike, read books, and had non-gamer friends. Unfortunately, I lacked the funds for my own system, but that didn't keep me from dreaming, or from wearing out my welcome at a number of video game-enhanced households. As luck would have it, between all my friends and cousins, I had access to quite a large collection of cartridges and systems. Eventually, I began beating my friends at their

own games, despite the fact that they could play them anytime they wanted.

In the summer of 1982, when I was 15 years old, Coleco began showing ads on television for their new ColecoVision game console, which had amazing, arcade-quality graphics. The colorful, unbelievably faithful *Donkey Kong* screenshot shown on TV sold me on the system, and I knew I had to have a ColecoVision, even if I had to lie, cheat, steal, or kill to get one. Going to the arcades was great, but the prospect of playing arcade-like video games in the comfort of my own home, without having to shell out untold numbers of quarters, sent my imagination soaring. (Why the ownership of a ColecoVision doesn't hold a spot near the top of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs is something I may never understand.)

The original retail price for the ColecoVision was close to \$200, but Santa only brought gifts totaling as much as \$100 to our house, so there was a real dilemma. Fortunately, by mowing lawns, I managed to save up the additional money needed, and I never had to resort to murder or thievery. Santa was grateful for the assist, and Christmas of 1982 saw me staying up late into the night, perched before the living room TV set, joystick in hand, marveling over the gorgeous visuals, charming music, and dynamic gameplay of *Donkey Kong* and *Mouse Trap*. Thus was born a lifelong hobby that has resulted in the own-

ership of hundreds of video game cartridges and more than 30 different consoles.

The question remains: What do I find so appealing about video games? Part of the answer is summed up tidily in *Webster's Desk Dictionary of the English Language* (1990), which gives the following definition for a video game: "any of various electronic games that involve moving or movable images controlled by the player on a TV screen." Thanks to such industry pioneers as Ralph Baer, who in 1966 conceived the idea of using a television set to play games, and Nolan Bushnell, who in 1972 invented *Pong* and founded Atari, a common TV could be transformed into an interactive device, giving users the thrill of manipulating the onscreen action, as opposed to simply watching it unfold. This was a heady concept to my impressionable young mind, and one I still find endlessly intriguing. In the 1960s, media theorist Marshall McLuhan was fond of referring to television as a "tactile medium," but the advent of video games permitted a literal interpretation of these words from the sage of the information age.

Further, video games give players control of a closed, finite universe, governed by a specific set of rules, as opposed to actual life, where we oftentimes wing it as we go along. There's a rational, almost sympathetic logic to video games that reality lacks. The player's character or ship may get killed or destroyed, and there may be a few unpleasant surprises along the way (such as the appearance of a virtually unbeatable foe), but the actual game player, with the simple press of a reset button, will live to fight another day, strive for a higher score, or try a new game. This is decidedly unlike the real world, where do-overs are rare, and a single misstep, physical breakdown, or twist of fate can (and eventually will) result in grim death. Game over, indeed. Video games are no substitute for real world pleasures (marriage, the birth of a child, spiritual enlightenment, what have you), but they do provide a nice reprieve from real world woes.

I enjoy video games from all eras, but I'm

especially fond of the classics. Unlike most modern video games, which have complicated controls, expansive worlds, varied missions, or meandering, non-linear environments, games from the '70s and early '80s usually consist of one to four game screens, simple rules, and finely honed, clearly defined objectives. (Some games, such as *Adventure* and *Pit-fall!* for the Atari 2600, are a bit more involved, but those types of games are the exception to the rule.) Most of the more enjoyable classics, such as *Centipede*, *Galaga*, *Mr. Do!*, and *Ms. Pac-Man*, are easy to learn yet hard to master, and have an addictive intensity and refined play mechanic that have largely been lost in other, later games.

Games for current consoles (PlayStation3, Nintendo Wii, Xbox 360) certainly have much to recommend, such as lifelike graphics, cinematic storylines, immersive sounds, and realistic simulation capabilities, but there's no beating the classics when it comes to subtle strategies, fast action, and sheer blood-pumping excitement. While most newer games frequently give players room to roam, regroup, and readjust, most retro titles put the player's character, ship, or other controllable object or objects in a state of constant peril, demanding that the player give the game his or her undivided attention every step of the way. In short, older games, despite their relative lack of technical sophistication, are oftentimes more fun, more challenging, and more accessible than newer ones.

In addition to playing video games, I enjoy reading about them as well. Back in the day, I bought countless issues of *Electronic Games*, *JoyStik*, and other video game magazines and read many more while standing at the magazine racks of various grocery stores (hey, I couldn't afford to buy all of them). To me, reading about video games is almost as much fun as playing them. These days, finding information about older games, especially some of the more obscure titles, is often difficult. When compared to movies, comics, and other popular art forms, classic video games are severely underrepresented in the publish-

ing industry. This volume is intended to rectify that discrepancy, at least to some degree.

A number of video game reference books have been written over the years, but *Classic Home Video Games* is more comprehensive in scope than any book of its type ever published. It includes substantive entries for every official game cartridge produced for every programmable console released in the U.S. during the golden age — that is, the pre-Nintendo NES era of gaming — meaning home game systems released between 1972 and 1984 are featured. The Atari 7800, which came out in 1986, is covered as well, since it was a throwback to previous systems and was originally intended to be on store shelves a couple of years earlier. The Nintendo NES hit the scene in 1985, but it ushered in a whole new era of gaming (what I term the silver age), providing a natural ending point for this volume.

During the writing process, I researched each game extensively, using numerous sources, primarily my own vast collection of games and experiences playing the games. In addition, I consulted my rather extensive game book and magazine library, along with a number of online sources that contain screen shots and box and manual scans for the games, as well as actual game downloads. Many entries herein include comparisons to similar games, comparisons to the same game released for other systems, and comparisons to the game's arcade counterpart. I don't expect arcade perfection from classic consoles, but I do find the differences to be interesting, and I hope that readers will too. Essentially, every entry includes the most interesting and most important information about that game.

In addition to data, descriptive elements, and historical information, most of the entries contain commentary on such elements as the quality of the graphics and the entertainment to be had. Obviously, the opinions expressed reflect my views (resulting in a tome that was literally decades in the making), but I tried to remain as objective as possible, especially when covering games belonging to genres that don't fit my tastes. For example, I

consider a poker simulation with better graphics and interfacing and more realistic rules to be superior to a similar game with substandard features, regardless of whether I enjoy poker or not.

The primary objective of these opinions is to help readers determine whether or not a game is worth dusting off, downloading, purchasing online, or otherwise acquiring, regardless of the era, regardless of the system. The pleasures found in many of these games transcend the era in which they were produced. Like old movies, classic novels, and vintage comic books, classic games exemplify the phrase “they just don't make 'em like that anymore.” Entire genres, such as slide-and-shoot, climbing, and maze, are virtually nonexistent on the current generation of consoles, with the notable exception of classics compilations and certain online services that let gamers indulge their desire for old-school cool.

This book doesn't cover computer games, since older computers have a less devoted following than vintage video game systems, and that's a much different market anyway. Coin-operated games and non-console game machines (such as dedicated *Pong* units and the like) aren't included, since each of those subjects could fill an entire volume on its own. Also, the Atari XE system is not covered, since it was designed to play Atari *computer* cartridges. Near the back of the book, an appendix gives acknowledgement to so-called “homebrew” titles, which are games produced by fans and amateur programmers, valiantly trying to keep their favorite classic consoles alive.

The reasons for the publication of this book are many. It is the ideal reference volume for classic gaming enthusiasts (of which there are hundreds of thousands), a fun book for pop culture historians, and a useful guide for directing retro-gamers and nostalgia buffs alike to the games they may enjoy. It is essentially the video game equivalent of an American classic movie guide, meaning readers won't find much information on label or box

variations, prototypes, unreleased games, system specs, collector pricing, or foreign releases. If the same game for the same system was re-released at a later date under the same title, I included an entry only for the initial release. No book can be all things to all people, but I usually mention when a game is especially rare or hard to find, so someone wanting to play that rare game will have some idea of what to expect when looking to acquire it.

With the advent of eBay, the phenomenon of classic console emulators, and the proliferation of old-school compilations for newer systems, gaining access to vintage home video games is easier than it's ever been. Conventions, such as the Classic Gaming Expo, are popping up all over the country, and many 30- and 40-somethings are enjoying the nostalgic fun these games bring. And, perhaps more importantly, younger gamers are discovering the simple pleasures, pure challenges,

and escapist thrills to be found in such legendary titles as *Dig Dug*, *Phoenix*, and *Space Invaders*. Classic video games are here to stay. As a reference volume, this book will help preserve the history of retro-gaming. Hopefully, it will also make the hobby a richer, more enjoyable experience for gamers of all ages.

A final point. One person's "slow, sluggish, interminably boring snooze fest" can be another person's "thoughtfully paced, nicely designed, intellectually satisfying adventure quest," meaning opinions vary greatly when it comes to entertainment. If you don't agree with my assessment of a particular title, I won't mind, but I do hope you will seek out the classic consoles and games you love and share them with your friends and family. Retro-gaming is a great (and harmless) way to relieve tension, have a few laughs, enjoy some friendly (and at times fierce) competition, or just while away a rainy Saturday afternoon.