

PREFACE

The year 1984 was a bad one for the U.S. home video game industry. No new consoles were released in 1984 (or in 1983, for that matter), and the Atari 5200 and ColecoVision, which had seemed so fresh and innovative in 1982, were (or already had been) abandoned by their manufacturers, not to mention most of their owners. The ubiquitous Atari 2600 was still being produced, but it was increasingly obvious that the antiquated system was a primitive relic of another time. Atari was losing money by the bucketful, prompting Warner Communications to sell the company. INTV rescued the aging Intellivision from oblivion in 1984, keeping it afloat until 1991, but sales of INTV games barely registered a blip on the consumer radar. What had once been a thriving industry, boasting gross sales of \$3.2 billion in 1982, was on the verge of extinction.

As fate would have it, a Japanese outfit called Nintendo (which began in 1889 as a playing card manufacturer) was more than eager to save the proverbial day. In 1985, the company test-marketed their Nintendo Entertainment System (called the Famicom in Japan) in select locations in New York City and released it nationwide in early 1986, giving birth to the next generation of home video game consoles. Bolstered by the legendary launch title *Super Mario Bros.*, which fascinated consumers with its expansive gameplay, delightful audio/visuals, and plethora of secrets and surprises, the Nintendo NES captured the collec-

tive consciousness of a nation and quickly supplanted the Atari 2600 as the system that the general public most frequently associated with video games. Nintendo put the U.S. home video game market back on the map, and the industry has been going strong ever since (despite such intermittent misfires as the Panasonic 3DO and the Philips CD-i).

I got my very own NES, along with its killer app (*Super Mario Bros.*, of course), in August of 1987 as a birthday present from my older brother. Before the year was up, I added such quality titles as *Castlevania*, *Contra*, *Ikari Warriors*, *Ghosts 'n Goblins*, *Double Dribble*, and *The Legend of Zelda* to my NES library. I was thrilled with the NES, but still kept my favorite system — the ColecoVision — hooked up to my 19-inch television set, which sat on a desk in my bedroom. Despite the advances made by Nintendo, I still enjoyed the simple pleasures of munching dots, climbing ladders, and shooting descending armadas of alien invaders that the ColecoVision, Atari 2600, and other older systems offered. (The NES was home to a number of retro arcade ports, such as *BurgerTime*, *Galaga*, and *Ms. Pac-Man*, but the emphasis was definitely on the newer, more elaborate games.)

As biased toward the ColecoVision (and other outdated systems) as I was, I had to admit that the NES games were vastly superior in many ways, especially in terms of graphics, controls (the NES D-pad was a huge improve-

ment over previous joysticks and control discs), and the epic nature of the games. Playing such adventure titles as *Metroid* and *The Legend of Zelda* was a liberating experience when compared to the relatively confining nature of most games for previous consoles. I found myself powering up Nintendo's gray box with increasing frequency, spending hours upon hours hopping on monsters, jumping across treacherous chasms, beating up bad guys, battling bosses, completing objective-specific levels, playing relatively realistic basketball and hockey, and undertaking comparatively complex missions, many of which revolved around rescuing the proverbial damsel in distress (usually a princess).

The NES revitalized my interest in home video games in general, spurring me to purchase the inevitable consoles that followed, such as the Sega Master System (1986), the Sega Genesis (1989), and the Super Nintendo (1991). Games like *Shinobi* (Master System), *Sonic the Hedgehog* (Genesis), and *Super Mario World* (Super NES) offered new worlds to explore, new challenges to conquer, and new shelves to build (for my increasingly large library of games).

Unlike many gamers, simply buying a new game, playing it to death, and then getting rid of it wasn't enough for me. I wanted to keep each cartridge (along with its accompanying box and manual), especially the games that I thoroughly enjoyed. To me, building a good library of video games is akin to having a nice collection of books or movies. You never know when the urge might hit to revisit (or share with a friend) an old favorite, be it Orwell's *1984*, Spielberg's *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, or Shigeru Miyamoto's *Super Mario Bros.* (The fact that Miyamoto is not a household name underscores the relative infancy of and the lack of respect accorded to the video game industry when compared to books and movies.)

Over the years, I have amassed countless video game cartridges and more than 40 game consoles, and I've always wanted to do something with that collection beyond simply playing the games. I enjoy reading about video games, but there aren't a whole lot of books on

the subject (compared to various other commercially viable pop culture art forms), especially in terms of literate, comprehensive, thoroughly researched reference guides. To help fill that gap, I wrote a book called *Classic Home Video Games, 1972–1984: A Complete Reference Guide* (McFarland, 2007), which chronicled every video game console released during that time, plus all the cartridges for those systems, regardless of the release dates of those cartridges. That book covered what I (and certain other historians) call the golden age of home video games, which includes such consoles as the Atari 2600, Intellivision, and ColecoVision.

The book you hold in your hands picks up where the first volume left off. *Classic Home Video Games, 1985–1988* covers the three systems released during that prolific era, plus all the games produced for those systems regardless of the release date. Included is every U.S.-released game for the Nintendo NES, the Sega Master System, and the Atari 7800. Those of you who read the first volume of *Classic Home Video Games* know I included the 7800 in that book (since it was a throwback to earlier systems, and since it completed the "trilogy" of classic Atari consoles), but I have updated it for the present work, expanding most of the entries and adding newly relevant information, such as comparisons to similar NES and Master System titles.

As with the first volume, this book is designed to be a video game version of a classic American movie guide, directing readers to the games they may enjoy. Each entry describes the gameplay in detail and includes pertinent data for that title, and most entries contain critical analysis. The review elements reflect my opinions, of course, but I tried to remain as objective as possible when considering the merits (or lack thereof) of each game. When possible (and when relevant), I compared the games to their arcade, computer, and other-console counterparts.

In addition to exhaustive entries for each game, the book includes a foreword by the legendary Bill "The Game Doctor" Kunkel, who co-founded *Electronic Games Magazine*, which basically invented the concept of video game

journalism, along with many of its medium-specific terms and phrases. As a teenager, I read each and every issue of *Electronic Games* from cover to cover, marveling over the publication's high-gloss photos, colorful screen shots, and entertaining, informative articles. If someone would have told me when I was 15 that someday Bill Kunkel would be writing the introduction to a book I had written, you could have knocked me over with a cathode ray.

In preparing *Classic Home Video Games, 1985–1988*, I played (and replayed) hundreds of games, usually at night. And the next morning (oftentimes as early as three), fueled by a strong, hot cup of Earl Grey (which I started drinking and quickly became addicted to after watching Captain Picard order it time and again from the food replicator on *Star Trek: The Next Generation*), I would write about the games I had played the night before. I researched each title extensively, using a variety of resources, most notably my own collection. Since most game cartridges for older systems found “in the wild” and even at game stores lack instruction manuals (despite the already extensive nature of my collection, I had to purchase and borrow lots of games during the writing of the book), I consulted websites (primarily Atari Age and Nintendo Age) that contain scans of said manuals. In addition, certain websites offer game downloads, which were especially helpful when it came to cartridges that I couldn't get my hands on.

Skeptical modernists may wonder why in the world someone would want to play (or read about, for that matter) games from the increasingly ancient 1980s (and early '90s), when today's consoles, such as the Xbox 360, PlayStation 3, and Nintendo Wii, offer vastly superior graphics and sounds. There's the nostalgia factor, of course, but one of the most important reasons lies in dimensions. With the exception of certain handheld titles (such as *New Super Mario Bros.*), puzzlers (such as the countless *Tetris* iterations), and download-only games (such as the decidedly retro *Mega Man 9*), two-dimensional gaming has largely become a lost art, alienating many of us who grew up in a 2D virtual world. Entire genres, such as the side-scrolling shooter and the side-scrolling plat-

former, have all but disappeared, prompting fans of those types of games to look to consoles of the past.

Many modern titles benefit tremendously from 3D graphics (playing *Halo* or *Resident Evil* in 2D would be unthinkable, for example), but old-school 2D games are generally more demanding, especially in terms of timing and precision of movement. Players are forced to make difficult jumps (or other maneuvers) and face hordes of hard-to-avoid enemies with alarming frequency. One-hit deaths are commonplace, and it is often necessary to battle the same boss or retry the same level many, many times before figuring out the correct pattern or developing the proper skill set required to defeat that boss or level.

In short, older games are frequently more challenging and more intense than newer ones, at least in terms of quick reflexes and pure eye-hand coordination. Certain modern titles are terribly difficult (*Ninja Gaiden* for the Xbox, anyone?), but they are the exception to the rule. Classic games are generally more simplistic in design as well, meaning there are fewer button combinations to hassle with and fewer hoops to jump through in learning how to play the games. Another appeal of classic gaming is the assortment of titles that reflect the zeitgeist and are likely to never be remade or ported to a current console, such as *Michael Jackson's Moonwalker*, *Pete Rose Baseball*, and *Bill & Ted's Excellent Video Game Adventure*. More important, many of the older games are still a heck of a lot of fun.

Thanks to eBay auctions, video game conventions (such as the Classic Gaming Expo and the Oklahoma Video Game Exhibition), and console emulators (such as the Nintendo Wii's Virtual Console, which lets players download games for the NES, Master System, and other antiquated systems), gamers of all ages are hopping aboard the classic video game bandwagon with increasing frequency, discovering the thrills and inevitable spills two-dimensional gaming has to offer. In addition, countless classic systems are still hooked up to television sets across the country, letting veteran gamers hang on to an important part of their youths. Instead of simply remembering the “good old days,”

video gamers have the advantage of reliving them again and again.

Classic Home Video Games, 1985–1988: A Complete Reference Guide pays tribute to those classic games by cataloging and describing each

and every one of them in detail, mainstream hits and obscure oddities alike. Hopefully, the book makes for entertaining reading as well, for both casual fans and hardcore gamers.