

COLLECTING THE CLASSICS

Every August hundreds of die-hard videogame fans descend upon Las Vegas to celebrate the unlikeliest of pop culture: classic videogames. But what exactly is a classic videogame? What is a collectible game? Surprisingly, they are not the same thing. Are all classics considered collectibles? And for that matter, are all collectibles valuable?

Most historians and collectors agree that the classic years of videogames, sometimes called the golden age, occurred from 1976 to 1984, although there isn't any firm reason why. Lee Seitz, webmaster of the popular Classic Video Games Nexus, seems to sum it up best:

"I basically consider any video game up to 1984ish to be a part of the classic period. Many companies were willing to take more risks with the games they released before the Crash than they were after. You have to wonder if *Q*bert*, for example, wasn't conceived until the mid-1990s, would it have been released when all the other games seem to be one-on-one fighters?"

The funny thing about the majority of home games released during the classic era is that most of them aren't really classics at all in the literal sense. *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (Third Edition) lists 6 definitions of *classic* and the one that comes closest to our needs is "a work recognized as definitive in its field." But what games can be deemed as definitive in their field?

The real classics of the period, the games that have stood the test of time, appeared in the arcades. Games like *Space Invaders*, *Asteroids*, *Pac-Man*, and *Defender* are all still played today in one incarnation or another. But most people don't collect arcade games, although it is possible. Keith Feinstein's popular *Videotopia* exhibit began as his personal collection of arcade machines. Today, Feinstein's more than 400 arcade machines can arguably be considered the largest collection of arcade

videogames in the world. But collecting arcade machines is the exception to the norm.

Nearly all videogame hobbyists collect classic console games. However when we talk about these games, the definition of *classics* becomes jaded. The majority of the console games that were released during the so-called classic era are far from being considered as the *definitive in their field*. Even home adaptations of true classic games like *Space Invaders* and *Pac-Man* cannot be considered classics. The Atari 2600 version of *Pac-Man* bares little resemblance to its arcade counterpart and can hardly be referred to as a 'definitive work'. In fact most of the games that were released during the golden age were like this. Nothing spectacular. So why do we enjoy them so much? Why do we think of them as classics when in fact they really aren't?

Chris Cavanaugh, editor of *Classic Gaming Magazine*, believes its due to nostalgia. "Sometimes it's nice to pop in an old game that takes you back to simpler times," says Cavanaugh. Classic games represent a time when games were simple and naïve and didn't need a team of designers, musicians, and artists to put them together. Most of the games were created by one person who thought up the idea and then brought that idea to fruition. And the sparse graphics were secondary to the fun that they produced. Whether the game be *Combat* from Atari or *Cat Trax* from Emerson, these were games that could be removed from their boxes and placed in their consoles without any need to consult the accompanying instruction pamphlet. And there was no need for any batteries or passwords because the games could usually be completed in a matter of minutes. The bottom line is that *all* the games that were released from 1976 through 1984 are referred to as classic games, regardless of how terrible they might be.

That isn't to say that there weren't any true classic console games. *Adventure*, the first console RPG, had dragons that looked like primitive ducks and the player was represented as a

dot. Yet the game was truly fun and challenging and was the first to include a hidden Easter Egg. A less appreciated game was the innovative *Quest For The Rings* for the Odyssey², the first game to conjoin videogames with board games.

Does a game, by virtue of it being considered a classic, make it a collectible? Not exactly. The realization is that anything can be considered a collectible if that's what the collector is interested in. A button is a collectible to someone who collects buttons. Nowadays we associate the word *collectible* with *valuable*. However, a collectible could be anything that a collector is interested in whether its valuable or not. The reality is that most games from the golden era and the consoles they played on aren't valuable at all. Unlike baseball cards, there is no such thing as 'rookie games' that may excel in value if their designers become famous. David Crane is considered one of the top game designers from the classic era. Yet his first anonymous creation for Atari, *Outlaw*, is worth only around \$5. And unlike comic books, videogames don't have 'first editions'. *Combat* was the first game for the Atari 2600 yet it's practically worthless. Why? Because *Combat* was packaged with the Atari 2600 during its first four years and probably wound up in more households than any other game except *Space Invaders*, which came packaged with the later 2600s.

As in other types of collectibles, videogames are rated by rarity. The rarer a product, the more valuable it is. While the condition is also important, a ripped label on a rare cartridge won't lower its value as dramatically as a ripped cover on a comic book. The Atari 2600, which has the largest catalog of all the classic systems, also boasts the most rare games. When the 2600 was king, it seemed like every company in creation made a game for the system. Licensing was not required and there was no such thing as lockout chips. However so much product resulted in a glut of games (causing the infamous crash of 1983) and with

store shelf spaces at a premium, many of the smaller companies couldn't get their games distributed adequately. As interest in videogames waned even the bigger companies like Atari and Parker Brothers saw little interest in their products. It is these games, the ones that were distributed in limited numbers, that are the most highly sought by collectors. And as time passes, they only get harder to find.

But that's part of the fun of collecting. Many collectors enjoy the 'thrill of the chase'. There is a magical satisfaction that can only be achieved when you find that last cartridge needed to complete a collection. However trying to define what makes up a complete collection is another matter altogether. Collectors of the 2600 have the toughest time completing collections because there are so many variances (see WHAT IS A COMPLETE COLLECTION?).

Most collections are system specific. Seven different systems were released in the United States during the classic era: Fairchild Channel F, RCA Studio II, Magnavox Odyssey², Mattel Intellivision, Emerson Arcadia 2001, the Bally Arcade, the Atari 2600 and 5200, and the Coleco Colecovision. Atari released the 7800 in 1986 but it is also considered a classic system since it was designed in 1983-1984 and is compatible with the 2600. Most of these systems were made in more than one model and the completist will try to acquire them all. For instance, the Fairchild Channel F was also known as the Video Entertainment System and was later released as the Channel F II. The Intellivision was also sold by Radio Shack (Tandyvision), Sears (Super Arcade II) and even under the Sylvania brand-name. It was replaced by the Intellivision II which was later replaced by the INTV System III. Bally sold its Arcade (also known as the Bally Computer and available in two colors) to Astrovision who first released it as the Astrovision Arcade and then the Astrocade. Even the formidable 2600 went through several incarnations. The

original woodgrain model had six switches on its face but this was reduced to four switches by 1980. That was followed by the 'Darth Vader' model, an all-black four-switch system, which was later replaced by the smaller 2600 Jr. And no 2600 collection would be complete without 2600 clones like the Coleco Gemini.

Regardless of how or what you collect, one thing is certain. You'll never get out alive. Once you're infected with the collecting bug, you'll be possessed by the desire to start new collections just so you'll have an excuse to seek or buy more games. And like Lay's Potato Chips, you won't be able to have only one. If you are fortunate to actually complete a collection, your next step will be to start your new one.

SIDEBAR 1 - WHAT IS A COMPLETE COLLECTION?

There is no such thing as a complete videogame collection. Due to the following variations, each collector must determine exactly what he wants to collect. The following variations apply directly to Atari 2600 collections, but most systems follow at least one of them.

REGION

Nothing is more frustrating to a novice 2600 collector than trying to determine what constitutes a complete collection. Some may restrict themselves to collecting only American titles, which in itself would be a major feat since there have been nearly 500 individual cartridges released.

But when we look overseas, that number may double. The 2600 was an immensely successful system and new 2600 titles were released overseas into mid 90's. There are dozens of titles that were never released in the United States at all. Unfortunately there is one major problem with collecting foreign games, especially those from Europe and South America.

Long before companies developed lock-out chips so people couldn't play imported games, we had issues of different broadcasting standards around the world. North America and Japan utilize the NTSC (National Television System Committee) standard where the television screen is made up of 525 horizontal scan lines. PAL (Phase Alternating Line), available in most Western European countries and South America, and SECAM (Sequential Couleur Avec Memoire), which is used primarily in France and Eastern Europe, are both broadcasting systems where the television screen is made up of 625 scan lines. While PAL and SECAM have many similarities, NTSC is incompatible with both.

PAL 2600 games will play on NTSC sets as long as the television set is approximately 20 years old. When a PAL game is displayed on an NTSC television set, the picture will roll. The

older TV sets had a vertical-hold knob that could control the roll. The colors may not look entirely correct but the games could still be played. The vertical roll cannot be controlled on newer television sets.

So why bother collecting these PAL cartridges if they can't be played? Well, some people just want everything that is out there and some games were only released overseas. The 2600 was still popular in many countries around the world into the early '90's which demanded that new games be developed and released. For the collector who demands at the very least a copy of every game that was made, the PAL games are a must. And it wasn't just foreign companies that released games only for the PAL audience. *Klax* was released by Atari only in PAL editions, for instance.

In some cases, the European versions of games are easier to get than their American counterparts. For instance, a company called Bomb released a quartet of games for the 2600 in the US and Europe. The American NTSC versions had very limited distribution and are especially difficult to find. The European PAL releases had a much greater distribution and are easier to find, especially in this modern world that is connected through the Internet. In these cases the NTSC versions will always command higher prices than their PAL rendition.

LABEL VARIATIONS

As time passed, Atari wound up using different labels on its cartridges. The earliest cartridges had text-only black labels. These were replaced by black labels with the game's title and a graphic taken from the game box. This was followed by a silver label with the graphic intact and the game's name within a red stripe under the system's logo. The final cartridges that Atari released had red labels.

In many cases some of the longer lasting games were produced with several of the label styles. Die-hard collectors recognize

each label as an individual game and need to have each and every variation. In some cases, especially in the old black text labels, the colors used in the names of the games varied from cartridge to cartridge. These minute changes are also fair game for collectors.

TITLES

Occasionally, the wizards in a company's marketing department may decide that a certain title might sell better than another. Atari released a few games under different titles, thus giving collectors an excuse to buy multiple copies of the same games. Examples of this can be found in Atari's *Basic Math*, which became *Fun With Numbers*; and *Hunt & Score*, which became *A Game of Concentration*. Lack of a license may be one reason why many games get their names changed. Most of the sports games for the Intellivision acquired new names when Mattel sold the Intellivision library to INTV Corp. Mattel's proud licensed sports titles such as *Major League Baseball* and *USCF Chess* were reduced to generic titles like *Big League Baseball* and *Chess* when they were released under the INTV moniker. Atari's soccer game took the opposite route in getting its name changed. *Championship Soccer* became *Pele's Soccer* after Atari signed a deal with the soccer legend. (Both Atari and Pele's New York Cosmos were owned by Warner Communications.)

Some foreign games have different names from their American brethren simply because the name of the game is called different things in different parts of the world. For instance the American Atari 2600 game *Realsports Soccer* was called *Realsports Football* in Europe. (The American *Realsports Football* was not released in Europe). And the Intellivision game that is called *Checkers* in the United States was released as *Draughts* in the United Kingdom.

In the Atari cases, the games are exactly the same despite their name differences. However the Intellivision games are

slightly different because they have a title screen that displays the game's name.

As far as a game's worth, according to the Digital Press Collector's Guide (see HOW TO START A CLASSIC GAMING COLLECTION), there is virtually little difference between the value of games that have different names. The one exception to this is the 2600 game *Atari Video Cube*, a rarity in its own right because it was distributed only through the Atari Game Club. However the game was also released in limited quantities under the name *Rubik's Cube* and is worth approximately twice as much as the club version of the game.

ALTERNATE COMPANIES

Sometimes the same game may have been released by two different companies at different times. This usually occurred when one company went out of business and sold its catalog to another. Atari published a few games for the 2600, including *Donkey Kong*, several years after Coleco released them. After Imagic went under, Activision purchased its catalog and re-released several Imagic games, including *Demon Attack*. All of these duplicate games are prime targets for completists and the Activision reissues are worth more than the Imagic originals.

During the classic-era, Sears department stores only sold products that had the Sears label, even though the products were manufactured by well-known companies. Videogames were no different. Sears released the Telegames Arcade which was really an Atari VCS, and the Super Telegames Arcade which was a Mattel Intellivision. The Sears/Atari cartridges resembled their Atari counterparts except that the Sears name was on the label instead of Atari. In some cases the names of the games were different. For instance, the Atari *Combat* became the Sears *Tank Plus* and *Breakout* became *Breakaway IV*. The Sears Intellivision games usually shared the same names as their Mattel counterparts except

in the cases where licenses were used. The Mattel *NBA Basketball* became plain *Basketball* under the Sears name. However the games were exactly the same and the title screen always displayed the Mattel name.

Because the Sears titles had less distribution than their corporate brethren, the Sears games are worth slightly more. One exception to this is *Cannon Man*, the Sears equivalent of Atari's *Human Cannonball*. This cartridge is roughly one of the rarest in the Sears catalog and is valued at \$50 while *Human Cannonball*'s is only valued at \$5.

BOXES & INSTRUCTIONS

Unlike other collectibles like coins and stamps, videogames are worth more if they're kept intact with their original boxes and instructions. The Digital Press Collector's Guide doubles the value of a game if its box and manual are included. This of course only applies to rare games. If the game is common, then the box and instructions are probably common also.

Atari also released its games in boxes that resembled the labels on the cartridges, which means if there are multiple labels of a game, there are also multiple instructions and boxes. Additionally, the original nine Atari 2600 cartridges came in gatefold boxes where the front of the box opened like a book to reveal the cartridge inside. This type of box was duplicated by several manufacturers including Magnavox and Mattel. Atari abandoned the gatefold box in 1978 in favor of the standard endflap type of box which is still used to this day by Nintendo for the N64.

REVIEW COPIES & PROTOTYPES

Magazines are produced months in advance of their actual cover date. In order for game reviews to be printed at the same time as the game's release, the manufacturers sent out review

copies of the games several months before the actual release date. The labels on these advance cartridges might say "Review, Media, or Loaner" copy but otherwise the games were usually no different from the actual released version. However the label variation made them rare. Occasionally some games were sent out to the press which were eventually pulled from the release schedule. These games will always be worth more than a media copy of a game that was released. Also, a media copy of a game can be considered extremely rare if the game itself differs from the eventual production version.

The rarest of all games are the prototypes. In some cases a prototype will only exist on an EPROM (a reprogrammable ROM chip) completely devoid of a cartridge. If there is a cartridge, it may have a generic label with the name of the game handwritten or typed. As with the media games, prototypes of games that were never released are worth a lot more than those that were eventually released. However all prototypes should be considered rare and most likely only a handful of any given title may exist.

Unless the company identified its EPROMS, it is sometimes difficult to identify a genuine EPROM from a counterfeit. With EPROM burners relatively cheap, it is quite easy to make copies of games. This is a good thing from a player's standpoint. A counterfeit game allows a collector to play a rare game that he might otherwise probably never have the opportunity to buy and play. It's like photocopying a copy of Superman #1 so people who will never be able to buy it can read it. Although you can read the copy as easy as if it was the original, the copy is completely worthless. Copied games can naturally be played but they have no value at all.

Even legitimate one-of-a-kind prototypes may have no value at all. Prototypes were usually stored on EPROMS which is nothing more than a series of transistors electronically set to either on or off. Bit-rot occurs when at least one of those transistor

gates lose their electric charge and reverse their programmed state. The result is a game that doesn't work. That one-of-a-kind game that would have been very valuable simply doesn't exist any more.

Because of their instability, EPROMS were not the ideal medium for mass production and were seldomly used for commercially released games. However some smaller companies may have used EPROMS to cut corners and in that case, even games that were released in stores, may no longer work. If at all possible, try to test the game before purchasing it.

SIDEBAR 2 - HOW TO START A CLASSIC GAMING COLLECTION

Garage sales are still the easiest way to start an instant classic gaming collection. It's not unusual to find a 2600 with ten or so cartridges for \$10 or less. Once in a while that bulk offer may include a rare title mixed in. Thrift shops are another good place to begin your quest, although games there may be pricier than at garage sales. Garage sales and thrift shops in the San Francisco area may produce better results as far as rarities are concerned because that's the area where most videogames companies were located and it's always possible that a former developer may offer his one-of-a-kind prototypes at a garage sale. But development wasn't only relegated to the west coast: Activision had a design center in New Jersey, and Commavid and Apollo were based in Chicago and Dallas respectively.

Collecting videogames as a hobby really took off during the past five years since the Internet became popular. Collectors around the world have suddenly been brought together in an instantaneous and inexpensive way.

There are thousands of auctions for classic videogames at any given time on Ebay (www.ebay.com). There are also many videogame stores nationwide that buy and sell classic games. You can order online from Telegames (www.telegames.com) which has been in business since the end of the classic era. Offered for sale at this site are brand-new classic games for many systems. Also on the web are several notable independent stores such as Michael Thomasson's Good Deal Games (www.gooddealgames.com) Thomasson's website also features interviews with industry personalities. Tom Zjaba's Tomorrow's Heroes (tomheroes.com) publishes a monthly online newsletter called *Retrogaming Times* which is filled with interesting articles that appeal to classic collectors. Mike Etler's Video Game Connections website (www.videogameconnections.com), doesn't offer any attractions for the classic collector but his store is where the action is. Every

few months Video Game Connections hosts a meeting for NAVA (North Atlantic Videogame Aficionados), a gathering of classic enthusiasts from as far south as South Carolina and as far north as Canada. Other popular regional groups include the Los Angeles-based SC3 (Southern California Classic Collectors), the San Francisco-based BAVE (Bay Area Videogame Enthusiasts), and the Washington State-based NWGCE (NorthWest Classic Games Enthusiasts). At these regional meetings you can talk with other collectors, play classic games, and even trade or buy games needed to fill holes. On a larger scale than the regional meetings are the annual events like Phillyclassic, held each spring in Philadelphia. Finally there is Classic Gaming Expo, held every August in Las Vegas, which draws nearly 1000 people from around the world. Included in this attendance are dozens of classic programmers. Past guests have included such notables as Ralph Baer, David Crane, and Howard Scott Warshaw.

Being part of a classic gaming community is an essential part of collecting. But even if you can't attend local meetings, there are virtual communities alive and well on the Internet. While there are several ways to get to them, one portal that is especially useful is the Digital Press website (www.digitpress.com). From there one can easily navigate to the classic IRC chat area or to rec.games.video.classic (RGVC), the classic gaming newsgroup. Other areas of interest are a retrogaming message board, a classified area to buy and sell games, and a collection of classic gaming FAQs.

Another essential classic portal to visit is Lee Seitz' Classic Video Game Nexus (fly.hiwaay.net/~lkseitz/cvg/nexus). Although it hasn't been updated in several months, it is still the number one source for accessing classic gaming Internet sites. The Nexus is divided into sections for arcade games, home games, and other media such as conventions and literature. Each section lists dozens of websites that you can link to.

One site that you can use the Nexus to get to is the Classic Gaming website (www.classicgaming.com). This is a commercial site that contains classic reviews, interviews, and a virtual museum that will tell you everything you want to know about classic systems.

In addition to the Internet, there are several books and magazines that are integral additions to every classic collector's library. Joe Santulli's Digital Press Collector's Guide is the collector's Bible and contains sections on every classic system. These sections list every known game along with their estimated values. Known prototypes, as well as titles that have never been discovered but are rumored to exist, are also included. The book is liberally splattered with screen shots and photos and includes tales of Lore where dozens of people wrote about their most memorable classic gaming moments.

Schiffer (www.schifferbooks.com), a publishing company well-known for printing various books about numerous collections, will be publishing its first videogame related book in early 2002. Titled "Collecting Classic Video Games", it is "mainly a price guide as most Schiffer books are, with tons of full color photographs. Has sections on most pre-NES systems, handhelds, memorabilia, etc...", according to author Billy Galaxy.

Arcade game collectors also have a price guide that they can refer to. The Arcade Video Game Price Guide by Dan Hower, John Talarico & Tim Ferrante. This book contains over 2,400 game titles and price values along with dozens of collectible game photos in both black & white and color. This book was published by Game Room magazine and is available from their website (www.gameroommagazine.com).

There are two magazines that should be required reading by every collector of classic games. *Classic Gaming Magazine* (www.classicgamer.com) is a quarterly that lies somewhere between fanzines and prozines. The magazine effectively simulates the

spirit of the original *Electronic Games* magazine and features news and articles about classic games.

And, of course, no collector of videogames would be complete without his monthly dose of *Electronic Gaming Monthly*!

SIDEBAR 3 - THE CARE AND FEEDING OF COLLECTIBLE CARTRIDGES

Several years ago a flood overtook the garage of Classic Gaming Expo organizer Sean Kelly. Inside the garage were housed hundreds of classic game cartridges. The boxes and instruction manuals were destroyed, but to Kelly's joy he discovered that the cartridges still worked. The truth of the matter is that videogame cartridges are pretty indestructible and only a few steps should be taken to keep them in pristine condition.

The number one rule when using cartridges, regardless if it's a classic game or a current one, is to not insert or remove the cartridge while the console is turned on. This is because the computer chips, in either the console or the cartridge, rely on an electric current. Placing a cartridge in a system that's already turned on would most likely cause a power surge that could damage either the game or the system.

Another rule of thumb is to keep the contacts clean. The contacts are the tip of the circuit board that sticks out of the cartridge and plugs into the console. Dirty contacts will tend to make the games unplayable. If they do get dusty, do not blow into them as that could cause the dust to spread. Fortunately there is a relatively easy way to clean them. Mike Etler, owner of Video Game Connections in Howell, NJ, tells his customers that cleaning the contacts with damp Q-tips will work in most cases. Etler also suggests to dry the contacts with a second Q-tip and then let them sit for a few minutes before plugging them into the console.

Classic Gaming Expo organizer John Hardie recommends plastic baggies to store cartridges in. Bags Unlimited (www.bagsunlimited.com) produces several plastic bags that are ideal for game collectors. Their polybag S50CS is used to store 50 trading cards. However its dimensions (3.5 x 5.625) make it ideal for storing cartridges.

Whether they're sealed in plastic or not, cartridges should be kept away from light to keep their labels from fading. Since

no one has yet developed a serious storage system for videogame collections, one can again be borrowed from card collecting. A box designed to store 3500 cards can hold somewhere in the neighborhood of 50 Atari or Colecovision games very nicely. Basically any type of box is good and one with a lid is even better.

SIDEBAR 4 - THE NEW COLLECTIBLES

Homebrew games are new games that have been written for the classic systems in recent years. These games have been produced in very low quantities yet they don't carry any value because they are still available. However a new trend has been emerging in the past few years: the collectible homebrew. These new games usually appear in limited quantities at videogame exhibitions. The first of these collectible homebrews was *Alfred Challenge*, a game for the 2600. Eric Bacher, the designer, personally flew in from France with 40 copies and sold them at the World of Atari show in 1998. These special edition cartridges included full-color labels, instruction booklets, and boxes. After the show, the game was available from California-based Best Electronics (www.best-electronics-ca.com). The version that Best sold came with a black & white label and no box. The original version is now considered a rarity but the Best version isn't.

Since the introduction of *Alfred Challenge*, programmers have been going out of their way to make the show versions of games extra special. Brian Prescott recently created three versions of his 2600 *Crazy Valet*. The standard version, which included a full-color label was available from Brian via the Internet. The Phillycon version included a special Phillycon logo on the label and the instruction book, as well as a special show opening screen. He duplicated this effort with a special Classic Gaming Expo edition which was only available at the Las Vegas event in 2001.

A controversy arose before the 2001 show concerning these exclusive games. Tim Snider only made 20 copies of his game *Venture II: The Abysmal Abyss*, which he planned to sell on a first-come, first-serve basis. However people began complaining that it wasn't fair that only 20 people could get the game. Disgusted by the complaints, Snider withdrew the game and instead sold them, along with an elaborate wooden treasure chest, for \$20

each to the first 19 people who requested a copy in advance. He sold the 20th copy of the game at an auction held at Classic Game Expo 2001 for a hefty \$210.

One extra-special collectible cartridge appeared at 2000's Classic Gaming Expo. It was an unreleased pinball demo that videogame legend Ralph Baer wrote for the Odyssey². Approximately 30 copies of the cartridge were produced and sold at the show, each personally autographed by the father of videogames himself.

SIDEBAR 5 - THE RAREST GAMES

Below is a list of some of the rarer games per system and their approximate value according to the Digital Press Collector's Guide.

- **Magicard** (Commavid for the 2600). Worth approximately \$1000.
Even rarer is a version of *Magicard* released under Commavid's former name Computer Magic. It was released only on a ROM chip without a case.
- **Air Raid** (Menavision for the 2600) \$500.
- **Power Lords** (NAP for the Odyssey²) \$125
- **Meteorites** (Electra Concepts for the 5200) \$100
- **Fathom** (Imagic for the Intellivision) \$60
- **Q*Bert's Qubes** (Parker Brothers for the Colecovision) \$55
- **Checkers** (Zircon for the Channel F) \$50
- **Red Clash** (Emerson for the Arcadia 2001) \$36