Built-in Compatibility

Not all game systems need adapters to make them compatible with earlier models. The four listed here were developed with built-in backward compatibility. Note that the PlayStation 2, which has been heralded as the first video game console to be backward compatible, came out 14 years after the Atari 7800.

Magnavox Odyssey 3

The Odyssey 3 was introduced at the 1982 Consumer Electronics Show as the follow-up to the Odyssey 2. In addition to a full-sized keyboard with real sculptured keys, the new Odyssey 3 would have its own library of games, which would feature enhanced graphics. These games would also play on the original Odyssey, but the graphics would not be enhanced. In addition, the Odyssey 3 would play all the games that had been released for the Odyssey 2, but there wouldn't be any difference in the graphics between the two systems. However, Magnavox spokespeople mentioned that some of the older titles would be reissued to be playable on the Odyssey 3 with the enhanced graphics. Naturally, this never came to pass, because the Odyssey 3 was never released.

The management at Magnavox couldn't decide whether the Odyssey 3 should be marketed as a video game console that people could use as a computer or as a computer that could play games before its planned 1983 launch. When launch time came, the management decided that the new console wasn't technologically advanced enough to compete against the computers that were available to the public, so the entire console was scrapped.


Unreleased Odyssey 3

Atari 7800

The Atari 7800 was first announced during the final days of the Warner Communications regime in 1984. Designed by General Computer Corporation of Massachusetts, the new console was meant to fix all the mistakes that Atari had made with the 5200. Unlike the bulky 5200, the 7800 was slim, as well as smaller than the original 2600. The poorly designed controllers for the 5200 were replaced with simple two-button joysticks. And without the aid of an adapter, the 7800 was completely compatible with the 2600 library.


The Atari 7800 could play 2600 carts without a converter!

The 7800 used the same cartridges that the 2600 used. While 2600 carts could fit into the 7800, 7800 cartridges could not be inserted into a 2600. A handful of third-party games, like those by Tigervision, apparently weren't compatible, but the majority of the 2600 library could be played on the 7800.

Because of all the third-party games that were available for the 2600, which Atari had no control of (and received no revenue from), Atari built an encryption key system into the 7800 cartridges. If the key was valid, the system would play in 7800 mode. If it wasn't valid, the system would remain in 2600 mode. Unfortunately, Atari never had a chance to try out its lock-out system on the industry. With the 1984 sale of Atari to the Tramiels, the 7800 was put into storage for two years while Nintendo rebuilt the industry with its own form of lock-out chip. By the time the 7800 was actually released, it had no hope of competing against the Nintendo Entertainment System, despite its compatibility with the 2600. By that time, very few still cared about the Atari 2600.

Nintendo Game Boy Color

Nintendo's Game Boy, first released in 1989, is arguably the most successful game console of all time. The original model, which played only monochrome games, managed to beat out superior color systems such as the Atari Lynx and the Sega Game Gear. When Nintendo decided to replace the aging monochrome Game Boy in 1998 with a color model, it wisely made sure that the new Game Boy was compatible with all the games from the old system.

Nintendo's Game Boy Color

With the release of the Game Boy Color, Game Boy cartridges were released in different colors so that users could know which system they could play on. The old monochrome games came in gray cartridges and could be played on all Game Boys. On the Game Boy Color, the monochrome games had the ability to[QUERY: Check edit] appear in four colors, similar to those offered by the Super Game Boy. Some popular monochrome games also had colors built into the Game Boy Color versions.

New color games came in black cartridges. These old games would appear in color on the Game Boy Color units and in monochrome on the older Game Boys.

Finally, new games were released, that could be played only on the Game Boy Color. Besides color, these games took advantage of the extra features that were built into the Game Boy Color, such as a faster clock speed, larger screen buffer, and more RAM.

Nintendo is continuing the Game Boy tradition of backward compatibility with the Game Boy Advance, which will be introduced in mid-2001. All the games that are currently available for the Game Boy and Game Boy Color will play on the Game Boy Advance. In addition, Nintendo will release a series of new games, which will play only on the Game Boy Advance.

Sony PlayStation 2

Although it has been called the first backward compatible system, we have seen that this is not true. However, whether it is the first or not, Sony's decision to make the PlayStation 2 compatible with its elder sibling is welcome news to the video gaming community.

The Sony PlayStation 2-not the first backward compatible machine.

Sony made the PlayStation 2 compatible with the earlier system in the same way that Sega made the Genesis compatible with the SMS: by including the earlier system's processor. In the case of Sony, the PlayStation 2 contains an I/O processor, which is basically the same as the one in the original PlayStation.