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# Enter the Fatality

## WITH JOHN TOBIAS, MORTAL KOMBAT

### By Patrick Hickey Jr.



FIRST MK1 RAIDEN DOODLE BY JOHN TOBIAS

Finish Him! Two epic words that cemented the work of Ed Boon, John Tobias and the rest of the team behind Williams' Mortal Kombat in pop culture lore forever. However, thanks to a plethora of gore and fatalities that provided unparalleled fun—and controversy, the game was nearly taken off of store shelves before it became iconic.

Mortal Kombat isn't all about blood and guts though. A fantastical adventure with unique characters, it was a wild fighting game that gave birth to a new era of visual prowess in the medium. Characters didn't have to look like cartoons anymore. And they certainly didn't have to be tiny. Simply put, if you grew up playing games the likes of Adventure, Haunted House or even Super Mario Bros. in the '80s, the humongous size of the characters alone in Mortal Kombat was enough to get you excited. In the end, the team told the world they were ready to get big—or go home.

In Mortal Kombat, everything just came together perfectly. Although the blood and guts get all the attention, the attention to visual realism, plot and gameplay innovation is just as important as the vicious fighting that takes place. On its own merits, it's a classic that gobbled up quarters in arcades and sold millions of copies on home consoles. Spawning dozens of sequels, spin-offs, comics and films, it's easily one of the most successful fighting game franchises of all- time.



Boon and Tobias' road to the series was far from straight- ahead, however. Although they both had an affinity for pop culture, this was a time when pitching a one-on-one fighting game was a rarity. Games like Mortal Kombat didn't exist. Prior to Mortal Kombat, Tobias was known for his work on the Smash TV series with Mark Turmell. Boon, on the other hand, was creating pinball games.

"I was 19 when I was hired at Williams/Bally/Midway straight out of art school, but I had worked professionally for a couple of years as a comic book illustrator," Tobias said. "Fortunately, I was a video game junky and arcade rat growing up, so I knew what I liked and what I thought I could provide. I saw some success with Smash TV, but it took a few years before we achieved the success that we did with Mortal Kombat. At that age, I don't know that many people are ready for that kind of success, but the work involved was so intense that it kept me grounded in the reality of production."

Although in his twenties when Mortal Kombat hit the arcades, Tobias was far from a stranger in the industry. Already working with a great the likes of Turmell, Tobias got to rub shoulders with other greats as well. As a result, Tobias sees his time on Smash TV as a pivotal one in the development of his career.

"Mark Turmell was heading up a new project that was an update to Robotron and was responsible for hiring me," Tobias said. "The great Eugene Jarvis became involved with what became Smash TV a little later on during its development. Both of those guys were huge influences on me in terms of their work ethic and passion for games. I still carry those values today.

"I looked at Eugene as this god of the industry, although he never carried himself that way. He always made himself accessible, which was very generous considering I was a 19-year-old kid. The department was so small that management gave us creative freedom to kind of do whatever we wanted and they obviously had plenty of faith in guys like Mark and Eugene. I think that freedom played a large part in the department's past and future successes."

During the '80s and '90s, you couldn't go to an arcade without seeing a Williams/ Bally/ Midway machine. From pinball games to classic arcade romps, the company was innovative and successful, to say the least. Their idea of using digitized graphics, rather than pixel-based sprites in the Mortal Kombat games was one of the foundations for the visual look of the series, but Boon and Tobias took it to another level with their love of pop culture, particularly film. After the idea of a Jean- Claude Van Damme–licensed fighting game fell through (Van Damme ironically went on to play Guile in the Street Fighter film and Street Fighter: The Movie video game), the two began to flex their creative muscles.

Going for something completely different than what had been done previously in the fighting genre, Tobias and Boon, ironically created a game that is the polar opposite of Capcom's iconic fighting series. Although loosely inspired by the 1984 arcade game Karate Champ and Tobias' love of martial arts flicks the likes of Big Trouble in Little China and Enter the Dragon, Mortal Kombat definitely took

on a life of its own. It's crazy to think that decades later Street Fighter and Mortal Kombat still represent the Yin and Yang of the fighting game genre.

However, the game's aesthetics and almost fantasy plot were just one part of the puzzle. The digitized graphics and Tobias' idea of having the characters in the game be as large as possible was just a starting point for Mortal Kombat. Over time, the gameplay evolved past standard fighting game fare. Developed before Capcom's Street Fighter II hit the arcade scene, Tobias and Boon were working with a blank canvas. Make no mistake, both teams were redefining what a fighting game could or should be. In the case of Mortal Kombat however, they were using an entirely different brush. The combination of realistic graphics and wild attacks like fireballs, lighting and ice shards made it accessible to both kids and adults. At the same time, the team didn't know what they had early on.

"The majority of our development process was spent sitting at a desk in front of a computer for long hours every day. Not too different than it is today," Tobias said. "Even on a game like Mortal Kombat where we captured live actors in a studio, that portion of work was dwarfed by the rest of the software development process. I think it became more exciting once the games were playable and we began to get a sense of what the finished product was going to be like. Certainly, the most excitement came when the games finally made it into the arcade." But way before the game was released in arcades, Boon and Tobias knew that Mortal Kombat was missing something. What it ultimately got to fill the gameplay void not only changed the series but the video game industry as well.

"There was an odd lull at the end of a match in Mortal Kombat and we were looking to give the winning player a chance to kind of put a punctuation on their victory. That's how it started," Tobias said. "A free shot for the winner as the loser was incapacitated. But, of course, that gave way to the 'What if 's?' We originally had planned for our end boss character, Shang Tsung, to decapitate the player's character in a single player match. But, we ended up using the frames to give the players a chance to do it to each other in a one-on-one match. Once we added that, we knew there was no going back and that was the birth of Mortal Kombat's Fatalities."

While fatalities changed the fate of the series and the fighting genre forever, Mortal Kombat is finely- layered. Although it's not cute like Mario or Sonic, it's got a look and feel that caters to everyone. Kids wanted to play it because it felt naughty and adults loved that it pulled no punches. That's only one part of its allure though. The game's story, in its essence, is about anything but brutality. A wild adventure with the future of the world in the balance, Mortal Kombat is about saving humanity from an insane force of destruction. It's all about the characters involved in the struggle as well. Although the first game only featured seven characters available from the start of the game, they were all memorable and continue to play an important role in the future of the series almost 25 years later. Without this iconic assortment of faces, it's possible Mortal Kombat isn't nearly as successful. Ultimately, it's almost like a Greek myth. From the clear good characters like Raiden, Liu Kang and Sonya Blade and the evil force of Shang Tsung and the virtually indestructible Goro, to the uncertainty of the ninjas Sub- Zero and Scorpion, Mortal Kombat's plot is far from linear. It's so easy to be pulled in a variety of directions.

"I love all my children," Tobias said. "But if I had to pick it would be one of the most visually iconic characters like Scorpion, Sub- Zero, or Goro."

While the violence definitely played a role in its initial success, the attention to character development and the widening of the world in future games made sure the series was here to stay. Now with over 30 characters, the original Mortal Kombat feels like a shell of the bloody soap opera it currently is. A mega-hit in the arcades, Mortal Kombat was eventu- ally ported to a bevy of systems, including the Sega Genesis and Super Nintendo. Once there, it became a colossal success but drew the ire of the United States government alongside other violent games the likes of Doom, Night Trap and Lethal Enforcers, the other games responsible for the creation of the ESRB rating system. While Night Trap never garnered a sequel and was taken off shelves entirely for a time in the United States, Lethal Enforcers was a success and spawned a sequel, but in no way, shape, or form could be compared to the monster hit that Mortal Kombat and its predecessors became.

The same can be said for the Doom series, which has sold over 10 million combined units and has its own film. "Mortal Kombat survived because outside of the attention and pop culture hype, it was fun to play and the sequels continued to improve the core of what made the original so much fun," Tobias said.

Unlike Night Trap and even Lethal Enforcers, the Mortal Kombat series also had fans that fought for it. They played it in arcades and on consoles—in droves. Over 20 years after its original release, the game is still one of the most popular video game series of all-time. From the original digitized graphics to crossovers with DC Comics, the series has some of the most dedicated fan bases in all of gaming.

"It's amazing how passionate fans still are about the original arcade games. They've combed through every pixel and line of code," Tobias said. "I think because

**Images provided by John Tobias**

of that, everything there is to know about the original Mortal Kombat games is pretty much known."

Although Tobias left the series after Mortal Kombat 4, he's gone on to work on a variety of different games including Tao Feng: Fist of the Lotus and as an employee of mobile games giant Zynga continues to influence gamers of all shapes and sizes. The fact that he played an influential role in the Mortal Kombat series, however, which has sold over 32 million copies as a series, cements his place in video game history. "I was part of something that brought fun and joy to a lot of people," Tobias said. "That will always feel good."

Looking back on his career, the humble Tobias believes the game's success had a lot to do with the time it was released. "It was created back in a day when as developers we were able to create something special with a small group of people and no outside interference," Tobias said. "No one telling us how to do our jobs. No focus groups or marketing departments. Just programmers, artists and a black box that got wheeled into an arcade. There is rarely such a pure connection between developer and player and that being the foundation of the series is one reason why people are still in love with it.

"We were special in what we brought to the game's development, but certainly we were also lucky for being in the right place at the right time. The technology and hardware we used to develop the original Mortal Kombat was a product of the software and mechanical engineers who created it. Ed Boon and I just happened to be wrapping up our previous games and we both had a desire to create a one on one fighting game. I happened to be a kung-fu movie fanatic and Ed was a genius programmer. Management was looking for a new game quickly and we were dumb enough to agree to do it. The rest is history." With all of the success and controversy behind it over the years, Mortal Kombat has a legacy that can never be denied. However, that won't stop Tobias from having a special and specific way he'd like his time with the franchise to be remembered.

"Mortal Kombat was born at a time when games were transitioning from a form of entertainment geared toward kids to one that encompassed older players as well," Tobias said. "I think we recognized that. People who played the game did so because it was fun to play, but they may have initially been drawn to it because of its pop culture notoriety as being ultra-violent. Even the newer iterations of the game today continue to take advantage of that notoriety by not backing away from the ultra-violent aspect. They just make sure to continue to back it up with a quality game." 🎮

**Patrick Hickey, Jr.** is the founder and editor-in-chief of ReviewFix.com and a lecturer of English and journalism at Kingsborough Community College, in Brooklyn, New York. Over the past decade, his video game coverage has been featured in national ad campaigns by top publishers the likes of Nintendo, Deep Silver, Disney and EA Sports. His recently published book, "The Minds Behind the Games: Interviews With Cult and Classic Game Developers," from McFarland and Company, has already earned praise from Forbes, Huffington Post, The New York Daily News and MSG Networks. He is also a former editor at NBC and National Video Games Writer at the late-Examiner.com. He is currently working on a followup, that already includes the developers of such iconic games as NFL Blitz, Conker's Bad Fur Day, Tony Hawk Pro Skater 3 and West of Loathing.

**BRETT'S OLD SCHOOL BARGAIN BIN**

# Maze Edition

## MOUSE TRAP AND MS. PACMAN

**By Brett Weiss**

**W**elcome to the third installment of Brett's Old School Bargain Bin, where I direct you to games worth playing that won't send you to the poor house.

This time the spotlight is on the Atari 2600 version of Mouse Trap, which is good despite its shortcomings, and Ms. Pac-Man: Maze Madness for the Nintendo 64, which is more expensive than most games this column will cover since desirable N64 carts tend to be a little pricey. Both are from one of my favorite genres: the maze game.

**B**ased on the 1981 Exidy coin-op game, Mouse Trap, not to be confused with the popular board game of the same name, features one of the oldest rivalries known to man. You are a mouse, and your enemies are cats. Your job is to maneuver around a maze, eating all of the cheese. When all cheese is gone, you move on to the next maze, which is the same in design.

As you gobble up pieces of cheese, which are like the dots in Pac-Man, cats will give chase and try to bite you. Luckily, if you have any bones in your stockpile, you can temporarily turn the tables on them by morphing into a dog (who barks convincingly), similar to eating a power pellet in Pac-Man. In each maze you will find four bones that you can gobble up to add to your arsenal and use at any time with a quick press of the fire button.

Situated on the walls of the maze are eight doors. By holding down the fire button, you can open or close all of the doors simultaneously, allowing you to gain access to certain areas of the maze and close off other areas to trap the cats. Unlike the original arcade game and the near-perfect ColecoVision port, there are no color-coded (red, blue, yellow) doors you can manipulate separately with color-coded buttons (three lighted buttons on the arcade game, three keypad buttons for the ColecoVision version). Since the doors lack color, they flicker to differentiate them from the walls.

The lack of color-coded doors is because, as fans and detractors of the console well know, the 2600 only has only one button on the joystick. The 2600 game, which has a flattened rectangular playfield instead of a square, is missing some other features as well, including bonus point prizes you can grab within the maze, the zigzagging hawks that disrupt your pathways, and the IN box at the center of the maze that will warp you randomly to one of the four corners of the maze. This last absence is inexcusable because Wizard of Wor for the Atari 2600 has a similar feature that works just fine.



**MOUSE TRAP**

**($5 CART ONLY, $10-15 COMPLETE) ATARI 2600**

**Publisher: Coleco**
**Developer: Coleco.**
**Maze, 1 Player, 1982**

Even with these shortcomings, Mouse Trap manages to do what so many Atari 2600 games have achieved: capturing the essence and much of the fun of the original game, despite some obvious differences, including in the case the lack of in-game music and just three cats in the maze (as opposed to five in the ColecoVision game and six in the coin-op version). The cheese-gobbling, cat-dodging, door-opening/closing action is solid, and, while the graphics have been simplified, the cats, dog, and mouse are recognizable as such and relatively cartoonish in appearance.

One thing this game does have that is lacking in other versions (including the Intellivision port) is an option that allows you to play the game with invisible mazes, cheeses, and bones by setting the color switch on the 2600 console to B/W (yes, there was a time when many Atari owners played their games on a black-and-white television set). Clearly (or not so clearly, given the invisibility), this feature adds another level of challenge to the game.

All in all, Coleco, a company that was often accused of purposely making bad ports for other consoles to make the ColecoVision look better, did a good job bringing Mouse Trap to the VCS. It's been stripped down to the essentials, but it is still fun and challenging to play.

At the turn of the century, Ms. Pac-Man got a facelift and a brand new series of adventures with Ms. Pac-Man: Maze Madness. Pac-Land is under attack by Mesmeralda, a horrible witch who has turned the Enchanted Castle into a ghost-ridden haunted house. Adding to the misery is the disappearance of the Princess.

Thanks to Professor Pac and his nifty Pactrometer, Ms. Pac-Man can pass through the force fields separating the four Wonders of Pac-Land: CleoPactra, Pac Ping Harbor, Crystal Caves and Haunted Halloween. To save the day and prevent darkness and chaos from spreading, Ms. Pac-Man must find retrieve one Gem of Virtue (Truth, Wisdom, Generosity and Courage) from each of the four lands.

Ms. Pac-Man: Maze Madness gives you a three-quarter perspective, top down view of each of the game's 180 scrolling mazes. There is much to do in each land. As you guide gaming's first lady around the pathways, you must eat all the Pac-Dots, search for hidden areas, and collect cherries, strawberries, peaches, and other fruits. You must also contend with Inky, Blinky, Pinky, and Sue, ghosts who follow you around and make your journey difficult. To temporarily turn the tables on your foes, you can eat one of several power pellets, which temporarily make you invincible and let you gobble the ghosts.

In addition to ghosts, you must also contend with other maze-roaming enemies and a number of obstacles new to the Ms. Pac-Man universe. These include sphinxes, alligators, centipedes, hellhounds, falling boulders, ice corridors, bolts of lightning, and nitro boxes, among other things. A number of puzzle elements have also been included, such as opening and closing switches and gates, pushing buttons, finding keys to unlock doors, and pushing moveable

blocks to access areas. Other elements of gameplay include moving platforms, warp portals, and popper pads (for jumping). Despite all the activity, no buttons are used in regular play, only the control pad or stick.

Ms. Pac-Man: Maze Madness also features an assortment of multi-player games. Dot Mania is a race to see who can be first to eat 80 Pac-Dots. If you get hit by a ghost, you lose ten dots. You can grab moneybags to make other players lose dots, don sneakers to run faster, dash chili pepper to burn other players and gobble cake to become big and indestructible. You can even generate lightning to shock other players.

In Ghost Tag, players begin the game as ghosts! When you see the Ms. Pac-Man icon, try to get to it so you can become Ms. Pac-Man. Once you assume the role of the feminist dot-gobbler, begin munching Pac-Dots as fast as you can. If you are a ghost, try to catch Ms. Pac-Man so you can turn into her. The first player to eat 50 Pac-Dots is the winner.

Dr. Bomb randomly chooses a player to hold a bomb that counts down from 30 seconds. To get rid of the bomb by passing it to another player, simply tag that player. When the timer reaches zero, whoever has the bomb gets blown up; bombed players turn into ghosts. When you're a ghost, you can maneuver around the maze and block other players. The winner is the last non-ghost player.

Like Pac-Man World for the PlayStation, Ms. Pac-Man: Maze Madness (which also hit the PlayStation and Dreamcast) is a delightful, expansive take on the Pac-Man universe. It has smooth, simplistic controls, colorfully cute 3D graphics, and tons of levels. The levels are short and there are save points galore, so you can play the game for a few minutes at a time or for a couple of hours or more.

The many puzzles in the quest mode (the primary portion of the game) are fun, but they are very easy to figure out. Unless you are a younger or less experienced gamer, you will rarely get stuck in a level. Also, the dot-munching, enemy-avoiding action is easy and lacking in intensity; you are rarely overwhelmed, and once you eat a monster, it won't come back (unlike the original game in which enemies return after a few seconds). The quest mode is fun, but lighthearted and not quite as challenging as some veteran gamers will require.

Where Maze Madness truly shines is in its multiplayer games. Ghost Tag is a fun and crazy game that will keep you and your friends laughing. It's a hoot when a group of ghosts are together and different players keep turning into Ms. Pac-Man. Dot Mania and DA Bomb are fun as well. All three games will rev up your competitive spirit while greasing up your funny bone.

The original arcade Ms. Pac-Man, one of the most popular video games of all time, is also included in the package. As you probably know, the game features four different non-scrolling, 2D mazes, each of them filled with Pac-Dots that you must eat. For bonus points you can gobble one of four Power Pellets in order become invincible and turn the tables on your enemies, those four pesky ghosts. You can also munch fruit treats that bounce around the mazes. When you clear a maze, you move on to the next. Classic. 🎮



## MS. PAC-MAN: MAZE MADNESS

### ($10-$16 CART ONLY, $40-45 COMPLETE) NINTENDO 64

**Publisher: Namco
Developer: Mass Media
Maze, 1-4 players
(simultaneous), 2000**

**Brett Weiss** - Brett Weiss is the author of nine books, including the Classic Home Video Games series, The 100 Greatest Console Video Games: 1977-1987, and The SNES Omnibus: The Super Nintendo and Its Games, Vol. 1 (A-M). He's had articles published in numerous magazines and newspapers, including the Fort Worth Star-Telegram, Game Informer, Classic Gamer Magazine, Video Game Trader, Video Game Collector, Filmfax, and Fangoria.

# International Center for the History of Electronic Games in Rochester, NY

### By Ken Horowitz



**E**fforts to preserve video game history are currently being made worldwide, but there are many professional organizations dedicated to this purpose. One of the most important is the International Center for the History of Electronic Games (ICHEG), which is a part of the Strong National Museum of Play, in Rochester, New York.

The museum features a collection of over 60,000 video games, electronic games, and electronic game-related historical items. There are titles from every major platform since 1972, making it one of the largest collections in the U.S. Moreover, the collection includes all manner of advertising and packaging, magazines, game design papers, and merchandise to provide researchers and historians with invaluable materials for exploring and documenting the video game industry. There's also the World Video Game Hall of Fame, the museum's



way of recognizing the popularity and influence of video games on all platforms.

What's most significant to me about the ICHEG's work is its dedication to conserving publications and personal papers. Often much rarer than commercially-released products due to their behind-the-scenes use and limited audience (often only the design team and producer), many of these documents have never been seen by the public before. They offer fascinating insight into how our favorite games were created and foster a greater appreciation for the work and sacrifice of those who make them. The ICEHG's collection contains items like more than 40 years' worth of papers from Ralph Baer (widely known as "the father of video games") and Carol Shaw (one of the first female game designers and pro-



grammer of the classic River Raid for the Atari 2600). There are also extensive collections from Ken and Roberta Williams (founders of Sierra On-Line), Jordan Mechner (Prince of Persia), and Will Wright (SimCity).

In my quest to document video game history, I've found that it can be quite difficult to get credible information. Many people misremember events and dates and some "tell stories" to cast themselves in a better historical light. The majority go out of their way to give accurate information, but memory is a fickle thing, and it takes multiple interviews to corroborate the veracity of a single event. These

documents are immensely helpful to that end; they clarify timelines, jog memories, and reveal many forgotten details.

The ICHEG's work in this field deserves everyone's support, as do the efforts of other similar institutions like the National Videogame Museum in Frisco, Texas, and the Museum of Art and Digital Entertainment in Oakland, California. There are also many other wonderful museums around the world that need support in this endeavor so that they may preserve the legacy of the industry and the people who made the games we love so much. The ICHEG should be on everyone's wish list of places to visit, and serious consideration should be made about donating items like prototypes, design documents, and other valuable materials to their collection. Our passion needs to keep its history alive, and the power to save it is in our hands.



L-R: Ryan Burger, Old School Gamer Publisher, Jon-Paul C. Dyson, PhD, Director, International Center for the History of Electronic Games, and Dan Walsh, OSG Editorial Consultant, in the archives at the Museum of Play

# Why Collect Video Games?

## THE CHALLENGE AND THE PLAY

**By Michael Thomasson**

**T**here are many reasons for playing and collecting classic video games. But first and foremost, it is simply a pastime. This is how most of us entered the hobby. There are, however, many factors as to why we stayed with the endeavor. Listed within this article are a few that have encouraged myself & others.

Concentrated game play, or innovation through ingenuity requires solid game play. Classic games could not depend on tools such as full-motion video, expanded color palettes, transparency, rotation, and zooming effects. Good games had solid game play, and could not be disguised or distract the player.

Many collectors play classic games for their simple mechanics. Their game play is easy to learn, since many games require only basic joystick maneuvering and a button or two to press.

Flexibility of challenge offers much encouragement to players. Adjustable skill levels and hundreds of game playing options (i.e. 2600 Space Invaders), allow the user to customize his or her playing experience. Virtually anyone of any age can participate in our hobby!

The Challenge of collecting is also alluring. Trying to locate all the 2600 variations could last a lifetime, while a 7800 collection could be obtained in a single summer. Oh, the thrill of the hunt!

A very nice advantage to collecting games is the requirement of little resources; especially the minimal expenditure needed to start the hobby. Sure, obtaining some rare games can require some hefty trading or cash resources, but overall, there is great fun to be found rather inexpensively. Many classic games are now available for fractions of their original consumer retail price. Atari, Intellivision, and many other games are easily found for a mere dollar. And best of all, most of the pricier games are more expensive because of their lower production runs due to lack of popularity and inferior sales. This means, in most cases, that the games which are more enjoyable to play are the least expensive to purchase!

Classic video game hardware and software constructed was very stable and durable. Cartridges from the early '80's will certainly outlive their modern day cd-rom counterparts. Moveable parts such as cd-rom drives, motorized doors, and liquid coolant will not survive longer than an immobile, but sturdy, Colecovision.

Collecting console games allows for various levels of interaction. Few hobbies allow for such interaction as classic video games. Sure, baseball cards show an image of the player, and a few statistics to read and learn about. Comic books tell a story, and entertain the aesthetics for one's eyes, but no other hobby has the interaction that is involved in video games. A single video game can be played for hours (RPG's -- months) with little or no duplication of events.

Even classic games, with few boards and levels are NEVER the same game twice. No offense to card collectors, but try having months of fun looking at Pete Rose's ugly mug!

Many collectors and players enjoy games for their technical merit. The feats many programmers pulled off with only 2K of memory were amazing for their time! Take into account the complexities of current 3D animation and programming, and games which utilize heavy mathematical calculations controlling such forces as true physics and complex lighting. That's just programming, too! What about the tiny microprocessors, integrated circuits, and miles of wire involved. Thomas Edison would be very jealous.

Of course, since we are dealing with "classic" games, there is the admirable factor of antiquity. Aside from being collectables in themselves, there is a lot to be said for Nostalgia. For many of us, collecting console games is a part of our past. With the entertainment form covering decades, many of us simply remember fond times with our family and friends in the safety of our living rooms. We know that inside each of those identical boxes, with its wires running into the back of our television set glowing blue in the sinking twilight, that there were people with stories. 🎮

**Michael Thomasson** is one of the most widely respected videogame historians in the field today. He teaches multiple college level videogame courses, and has contributed to dozens of gaming texts and television shows including MTV's Video MODS and the highly-rated book Downright Bizarre Games. He has written business plans, managed a multiple game-related retail stores, and consults for multiple video game and computer museums. Michael has helped publish 100s of games on Atari, Sega and other console platforms. In 2014, The Guinness Book of World Records declared that Thomasson had "The Largest Videogame Collection" in the world. Visit www.GoodDealGames.com.

# Early Computer Baseball

## By Bill Lange

The earliest computer baseball games felt like pencil and dice tabletop baseball simulation games like Sports Illustrated Superstar Baseball, or the much more influential Strat-O-Matic Baseball, with the computer simply taking over the role of the dice, the pencil, and the scorecard.

As the hardware advanced and the programmers became more skilled, computer baseball games would begin to gain depth as well as better graphics and sound. Two styles of computerized baseball games emerged. One type allowed you to use, modify or enter new real-world statistics. These statistics were easily found in the sports pages of newspapers, on the back of baseball cards, the Baseball Encyclopedia and other sources. These styles of games typically let you play the field manager or general manager rather than the individual players. The other main style of computerized baseball games were the arcade-action twitch games in which one or two players could battle it out with buttons, joysticks, trackballs and/or the computer keyboard.


**Computer Baseball - Apple II Strategic Simulations, 1981**

In the early 1960s, an IBM engineer and rabid baseball fan from Akron, Ohio named John Burgeson created an early punch card-based baseball simulation game for the IBM 1620 computer. While Burgeson programmed the game for his own use, it was later included in the free software library shipped with the million dollar (adjusted for today's dollars) computer. In this one player game, the player would pick a team of nine baseball players from a preset roster. The computer would then form a team from the remaining available players. Once the two teams were picked, the computer would play the game based on programmed statistics and print the results.

In the early 1970s, an English major named Don Daglow created a baseball game for Digital Equipment Corporation's PDP-10 mainframe at Pomona College in Claremont, California. What made Daglow's game different from Burgeson's game was that the players could actively manage the baseball game instead of just picking the teams. Players could direct their pitchers, batters and even their baserunners throughout the game. The computer would print the results as if it were a play-by-play radio announcer. Daglow would continue to tinker with his game and

would have a hand in computerized baseball games (and many other genres) for the next forty years.

### COMPUTER BASEBALL

An early baseball game for the microcomputer, Computer Baseball by Charles Merrow and Jack Avery, was published by Strategic Simulations in 1981. It was released for various platforms such as Apple II, Atari 8-bit, Commodore 64, DOS and others. In this game, featuring text and primitive graphics, you could choose one to two players, or no players, with the computer managing both teams. The game comes with a selection of all-time great teams from 1906 to 1980. With Computer Baseball, you could manage other teams by purchasing or creating new data disks. Players are limited to managerial decisions such as batting lineups, pitcher selection as well as player substitutions.
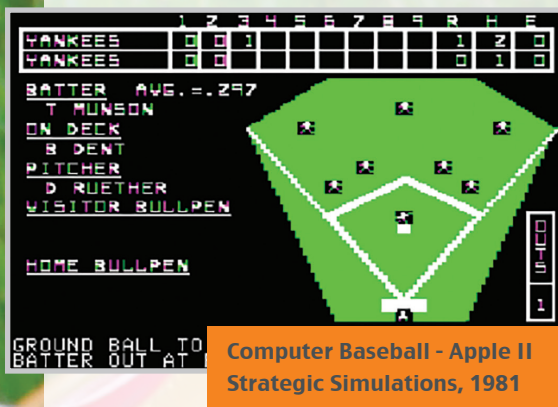
### STAR LEAGUE BASEBALL

Star League Baseball (SLB) is a 1983 release by Gamestar Software. It is a one or two player game created by Dan Ugrin, Scott Orr and Bruce Mitchell for the Apple II, Atari 8-bit, C64/128 and the Macintosh. SLB shows the field as if you were looking down from the right field upper deck seats.

SLB has great graphics, animation and sound effects. The pregame screen plays catchy theme music. The game itself starts off with the flag waving in the breeze above the scoreboard as the National Anthem plays on the stadium organ. Each half inning begins with a brief view of the scoreboard and then the roar of the crowd as the leadoff hitter approaches the plate.


**Star League Baseball - Atari 8 Bit Gamestar Software, 1983**

In his recent book Breakout: How Atari 8-bit Computers Defined A Generation, author Jamie Lendino states that ".. Star League Baseball is tremendous fun, and has a fast and addictive pace ... Star League Baseball is an excellent and original example." And recently on Facebook, SLB fan Don Janis stated "Loved that game. A buddy and I made entire teams and two divisions, kept stats, and did commentary while playing." That is a dedicated fan!

While the game had a few minor issues, such as being able to easily throw out runners at first base on hits to right field, at the time of its release, it was one of the best arcade-style twitch baseball games and it still holds up pretty well today. It also included some nice features such as the ability to foul, score-

board trivia display and bases-loaded rally music.

## MICRO LEAGUE BASEBALL

Micro League Baseball (MLB), a traditional baseball simulator for one or two players, was released for the Apple II, Atari 8-bit, Atari ST, Commodore Amiga, Commodore 64 and DOS platforms. It was published by Micro League Sports Association and was one of the first baseball games to get licensed so that it could use actual Major League Baseball teams and players.

On the Atari 8-bit version, the game starts out with a rendition of Take Me Out to the Ballgame. If you wait long enough, it will go into demo mode. The graphics and sound are nice, but make no mistake about it, this is a statistics-based baseball game.

It also had an optional General Manager disk so that users could create, edit and delete player statistics and team rosters. You have the ability to create any kind of roster you choose. It also has an optional Box Score/Stat Compiler disk for the Sabermetricians.

MLB is a General Manager/Field Manager wannabe's dream! In addition to the MLB game disk itself, there are a dozen or so optional disks, including actual Major League Baseball team statistics for the early to late 80s, All-time great All Stars statistics and various World Series teams from the 50s, 60s, and 70s. There are also a few General Manager utilities.

During the World Series in the fall of 2017, my friend Peter Fletcher entered the season statistics for the Houston Astros and the Los Angeles Dodgers in to Micro League Baseball II on his Atari ST. He allowed his computer to play out the series and tweeted out the results. The Dodgers won his 2017 Micro League World Series with a 9-2 victory in game 5 with Clayton Kershaw's two wins and ERA likely edging out Justin Turner's two Home Runs and batting average for MVP honors!

While MLB has nice graphics, it is not a twitch game. It is a management strategy game based on real-world statistics. If you are a Sabermetrician, you are likely to enjoy this game.

## HARDBALL!

Hardball! is another arcade-style game designed by Bob Whitehead (also creator of Home Run on the Atari VCS/2600), published in 1985 by Accolade. At the time of its release, it had some of the best arcade graphics of any computer-based baseball game.

Hardball! gives a screen full of options before starting such as one player, two player, DH, etc. It also gives you a lineup of players and allows you to manage substitutions. It also displayed on-screen instructions for pitchers and batters.

The manager has a lot of optional decisions to make: hit, bunt, player substitution, fielding defense. The pitchers have a half dozen pitches to choose from and they can also



**Micro League Baseball - Atari 8 Bit**
**MicroLeague Sports Assoc, 1984**

pick pitch locations. Also, according to the manual, "As a pitcher gets tired, the probability of throwing a strike goes down."

The main viewpoint of the camera, is from left-center field or from behind the pitcher from just to the shortstop side of second base. An over-head look at the playing field resides in the lower right hand corner of the screen.

Hardball! is a strategy-based arcade-style twitch game with a lineup of fictional ball players and made-up statistics. After playing the game enough times, the players start to feel real enough as you get used to their abilities and style of play.

This game was available for just about every popular micro-computer in the mid-1980s.

## EARL WEAVER BASEBALL

Earl Weaver Baseball (EWB). EWB was another game by Don Daglow as well as Eddie Dombrower and published by Electronic Arts. Long time Baltimore Orioles' manager Earl Weaver, provided the managerial strategy for the game, hence the game's name.
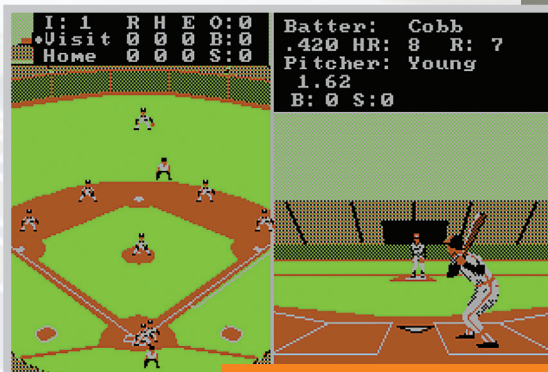
EWB was another one player, two player or computer vs. computer game. It was available for the Apple II, Commodore Amiga, DOS and other platforms. Computer Gaming World magazine named EWB its game of the year for 1987.

EWB was a hybrid game in that it allowed players to choose from either arcade or manager mode. It has both single pitch mode (where one pitch determined the outcome of the at bat) and regular mode (where every pitch of an at bat was played out). The game also displayed both current (as of the late 1980s) and historical baseball stadiums.



**Earl Weaver Baseball - DOS**
**Electronic Arts, 1987**

While this game also had a few minor issues, it included many new features that would go on to become the standard in the computer baseball game genre.
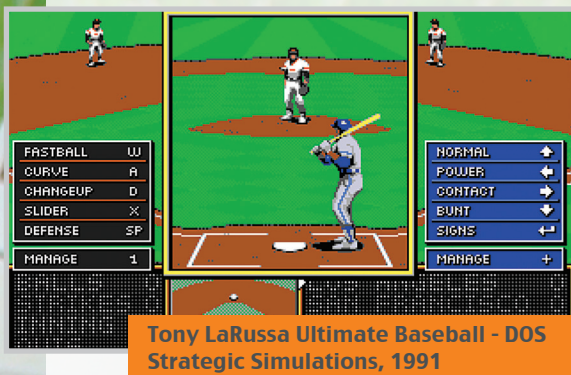
Definitely give this game a try, especially if you can find the Commodore Amiga version of the original EWB.

## TONY LARUSSA BASEBALL

Tony La Russa Baseball (TLRB) was a series of computer and console computerized baseball games. And again, Don Daglow was on the development team. You can see



**Hardball! - Atari 8 Bit**
**Accolade 1985**

how Daglow's work evolved from his early mainframe games to 1983's Intellivision World Series.

Baseball to 1987's Earl Weaver Baseball to TLRB. The game refined many of the features found in EWB. It also included some firsts of its own. Instead of using Earl Weaver as the managerial inspiration, the developers of this game worked extensively with Major League Baseball manager Tony La Russa, who managed the Oakland Athletics at the time, on the game's management artificial intelligence.


**Tony LaRussa Ultimate Baseball - DOS Strategic Simulations, 1991**

This game was available for the Commodore 64 and DOS. There was also a console version for the Sega Genesis. It is fairly easy to find and run the DOS version of the game today in a DOSBox. It has nice colorful graphics and superb baseball sound and music.

This article is just a brief history and covers only a few of the

early computer baseball games on various computer systems. There were many others available as well, including games for consoles such as the Atari VCS/2600, the Mattel Intellivision, the Nintendo Entertainment System, etc. Many of the games also had various add-on and expansion disks with additional team data, stat compilers and other interesting utilities.

What was your favorite computerized baseball game? Hit me up on Twitter at @BillLange1968 at let me know! **:G**

**Bill Lange** – Bill is a software engineer. He designs and developments cloud based software solutions. He resides in NJ with his wife Lucy and their dog Yoda. In his spare time, he likes to tinker with game programming, 8-bit computers and the classic arcade machines of his youth.

## EXTRA INNINGS

Likely my first electronic baseball game, **Mattel's Baseball** (1978) is a classic handheld electronic LED-based game. I drained many free Radio Shack "Battery Of The Month" Enercell 9v batteries on this game until I was gifted a 9v plug-in power adapter. The game controls the pitching and defense. The human player controls hitting and base running. No stats, all twitch. In recent years, some of Mattel's handheld electronics games, including Baseball, have been re-released for a new generation.
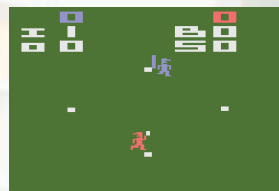
In 1978, soon after the release of the **Atari VCS/2600**, Atari released **Home Run** programmed by Bob Whitehead and Dave Rolf. This simplistic one or two player game has the baseball basics: pitcher, batter, ball, bat, bases and an on-screen scoreboard. There is pitching, hitting, fielding, balls and strikes, but not much else.

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# Happy Meal Toys and Other Fast Food Tie-Ins

## By David Oxford



Since the dawn of video games, there have been seemingly endless efforts made to bring the pastime we all enjoy to a more mainstream audience: television, comic books, movies, music, and more. But one method that's been around for nearly as long as the medium itself is the fast food tie-in promotion.

Video games began to make strides towards mainstream popularity in the early 70's, and it was not long after that restaurants such as Burger King and McDonald's began to experiment with the idea of aiming special meals at kids that would tie in with popular movies of the time, with Star Wars and Star Trek being the respective pioneers in this new frontier of marketing synergy.

However, while it's difficult to pinpoint what the actual first video game tie-in at a fast food restaurant was, we do know that two of the earliest such promotions on record took place in 1982.

Have you ever seen an old-style Pac-Man drinking glass around and wondered where it came from? If you're thinking Arby's, then you would be correct! For just 59 to 65 cents USD (about $1.54-$1.70 in today's money) with any purchase, you could bring home your very own glass featuring the puckish hero grabbing and gobbling down ghosts like so many Arby's roast beef sandwiches.

Unlike most promotions of this sort, though, there was only



one design available – handy for collectors.

The other big promotion of 1982 came from none other than McDonald's. Rather than a more tangible offering, the Golden Arches was the home of a sweepstakes with a range of Atari and McDonald's prizes, an Atari Home Computer and Video Game Center being foremost among them.

In order to win, participants would receive a scratch-off

card themed around one of four Atari games: Asteroids, Missile Command, Centipede, and Star Raiders. They would then scratch off silver spots one at a time in the first section in the hopes of matching two identical prizes before uncovering a "Zap" spot. If they succeed, they would then be able to scratch off the silver screen to reveal what they'd won.

Fast-forward a year...or eight, and we find ourselves with one of the most famous and popular tie-in promotions of all time. Nintendo's popularity in North America was at a fever pitch, and ready to climb even higher with the release of Super Mario Bros. 3.

The game came in hot in the early part of 1990, and Nintendo sought to keep that momentum going as August rolled around (can you imagine waiting that long for a tie-in in this day and age?) by teaming up with McDonald's to offer a Happy Meal promotion featuring one of not four, but five different toys: A spring-powered jumping Raccoon Mario, a pull-back motorized cloud-riding Luigi, a flipping Little Goomba, and a pump-powered hopping Koopa Paratroopa. In addition, the Under-3 crowd were treated to a Raccoon Mario finger puppet – arguably a greater prize than the version aimed at older kids, at least if you were looking for a Mario that would play well with your Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles figures.

Let's skip ahead a few years to 1994. Children of the 90's all knew what the battle cry was for one side of the 16-bit Console Wars: "Genesis Does What Nintendon't." But in some cases, SEGA would do what Nintendid anyway – in this case, have a Happy Meal tie-in of their own.

Interestingly enough, it wouldn't be the first or second Sonic the Hedgehog games that would receive the Golden Arches plastic treatment, but the third, striking an amusing parallel to the tie-in with Mario's own third outing. Those who dined with the Blue Blur were treated to one of the following: a launching Sonic, a spinning Knuckles, a flying Tails (modified to not do that in Europe), and a wind-up Eggmobile driven by an Adventures of Sonic the Hedgehog-styled Dr. Robotnik (who was changed to his regular appearance for Japan's version).

The Under-3 set didn't get such a cool offering this time around, though, a yellow ball with a picture of Sonic the Hedgehog printed on it isn't the worst prize, either.

What makes this particular promotion even more interesting is that unlike Nintendo's Mario-come-lately Happy Meal, the Sonic the Hedgehog 3 version was timed to coincide with the game's launch – or rather, the game's launch was timed to coincide with the set-in-stone McDonald's deal. This forced the developers to ultimately release it in the "half-a-game" state it shipped in, leading to the creation of Sonic & Knuckles, which launched later

that same year. With its trademark Lock-On Technology, players would finally get to experience the full game as intended.

It was no doubt a bitter pill to swallow for the SEGA staff of the day, but difficult lessons were learned. In November 2015, SEGA of America arranged a similar deal with Carls Jr. and Hardee's for a kids meal promotion featuring not just Sonic Boom, which had a cartoon running on Cartoon Network at the time, but specifically Sonic Boom: Fire & Ice for the Nintendo 3DS.

Faced with the same decision as before, this time SEGA instead decided to delay the game to 2016 "in order to make sure the game has the time and polish needed," thus leaving the holiday promotion without the game it was created to promote.

Between these two instances, Sonic would appear at McDonald's a few more times, and given the bitter rivalry between Nintendo and SEGA at the time, one has to wonder if there wasn't some hurt feelings between Mario and Ronald's corporate parents. Whatever the reason, it was Burger King who would land the deal that was as good as gold – literally.

In 1999, Nintendo and BK teamed up to offer not four, not five, but fifty-seven different Pokémon toys in the Burger King





Kids Meal, split across seven categories: Squirters, bean bags, keychains, launchers, light-ups, talking plush toys, and rev-tops. Each came with an exclusive movie-based trading card, each encased in its own special Poké Ball, concealing just which Pokémon you got until you opened it.

With so many to collect over the course of 56 days, Burger King would even go on to hold "trading nights" on Tuesdays for kids to come in and try to swap out their unwanted doubles with each other for ones they didn't have.

If that wasn't enough, the Home of the Whopper doubled down on the rampant success of pocket monsters by offering six different 23-karat gold-plated trading cards. Contained in a mechanized-opening metallic Poké Ball, with a certificate of authenticity signed by then-Nintendo of America Chairman Howard Lincoln, you would find a card of either Pikachu, Mewtwo, Togepi, Poliwhirl, Charizard, and Jigglypuff. Unlike the Kids Meal toys, these were clearly labeled, so you could bring home any one you wanted (subject to availability) for just $1.99 USD ($3.01 today) with the purchase of any Value Meal – no doubt a way to score even more profit off the parents of Pokémon Masters in training.

The promotion was enormously successful. Unfortunately, almost anything this successful begets controversy, and Burger King's Pokémon promotion was no different, as the Poké Balls found in the Kids Meals contained a design flaw.

As it would turn out, one of the halves of the Poké Ball would prove to be just the right size to cover the nose and mouth of an infant, a fact which unfortunately led to the suffocation of two such young children and a recall of the Poké Balls. Despite this, the promotion would continue, and future manufacturers of Poké Ball toys would include air holes as a safety precaution.

There have been many other fast food tie-in promotions with video games over the years, with these being the most noteworthy. I can't wait to see whose kid's meal I need to buy next to continue my collection! children now. Video games, you've come a long way, baby! 🎮

**David Oxford** - Lover of fine foods and felines, as well as comics, toys, and... oh yeah, video games. David Oxford has written about the latter for years, including for Nintendo Power, Nintendo Force, Mega Visions, and he even wrote the book on Mega Man.

# Rec Room Masters: AlphaCade

## BUILD IT UP AND HAVE FUN!

### By Old School Gamer



**A**s an owner of nearly a dozen full arcade machines, including cocktails, full size standups and cabarets, it's not like I really needed another arcade machine in my house. But after seeing products by Rec Room Masters at the Southern Fried Gaming Expo this summer, I wanted to see what I could do with an "Xtension Alpha-Cade Series Scaled Down Arcade Machine." Much like how I built my own Game Boy sized emulation machine with the ClockworkPi Gameshell (also covered in this issue), a sense of pride comes from building something yourself, and it happened again with this Xtension arcade machine.

The Alpha-Cade from Rec Room Masters comes unassembled, in a Ikea-style format if you are familiar with the Swedish Retailer that is the king of shelves and furniture that require you to assemble. For those of you who aren't familiar with Ikea, basically they give you all the wood precut, pre-grooved, pre-drilled and well labelled, plus the bolts and parts that put everything into one piece, and some easy to follow instructions. Rec Room Masters has done the same thing, but specializing in arcade cabinets/machines of different sizes. They offer full size uprights, pedestals, cocktails and many other variants that we don't have room to discuss here.

For the Alpha Cade, the cabinet pieces all came to me very well bubble wrapped, and are fantastically cut, with some notes engraved right into the non-display side, holes bored and everything. I unpacked it and laid out all of the pieces. Then I proceeded to go to the web address specified and watched the video once through just looking at the pieces involved and soaking it all in. The video is just under 10 minutes long. Then I prepared myself to roll. I grabbed a rubber mallet, the parts bag that was included, and made space on my family room floor.

I applied the stickers for the sides, the wood, and the marquee area. Then I started on the main assembly. Laying the first side down, you start assembling the pieces to it, making sure everything fits nice and snug, and it truly did. When assembling all the outside and inside boards, the only problem I came across is that the 19" 4:3 LCD monitor I had was a bit older and the larger bezel wouldn't fit in the Alpha Cade-mounted area. I had to trade with a friend for one that was slightly thinner.
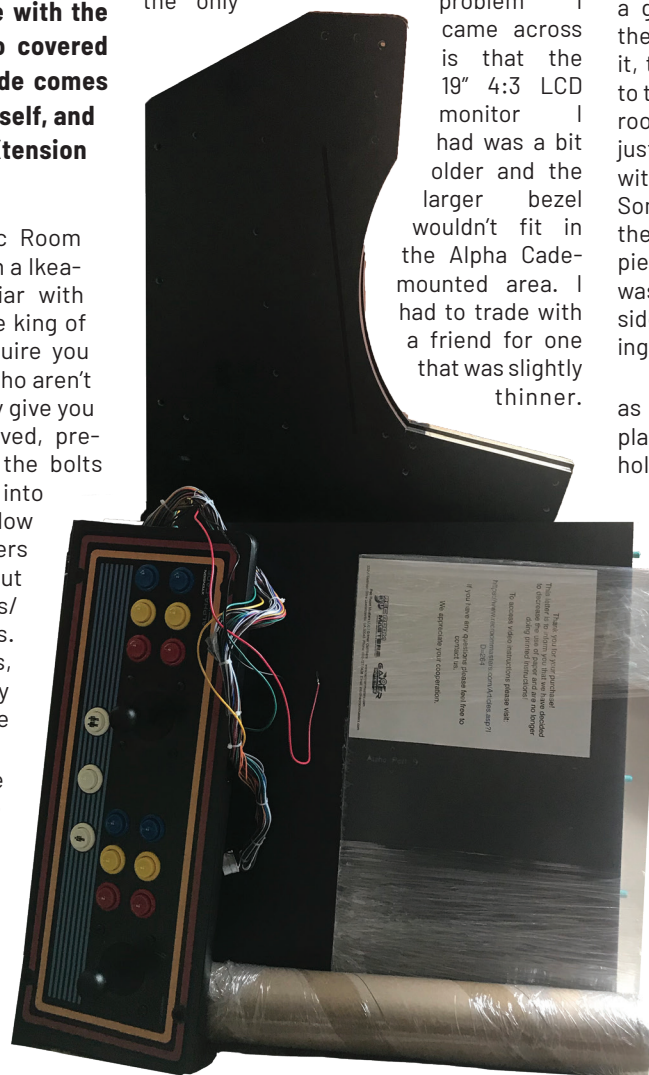


When planning yours, make sure to measure the total width of the screen and its depth for a good fit. After getting the monitor mounted, I ran the cabling to it, then started assembling the other side to the first one that was laying on my family room floor. Starting at the bottom, it was just making sure all the peg holes lined up with the pegs that stuck out of the boards. Some bang banging with the mallet when they were close and some finagling of the pieces made it all come together. Then it was all about taking the bolts into the unit's sides, using the allen wrench and tightening the entire unit together.

At this point, it's just about done, as you place the control panel in its place, run the wiring through the right holes and mount it on the front of the cabinet. Depending on the variant you purchase, you then have a Jamma harness to hook up to the arcade board in the back, or USB on the Emulator edition (to be hooked up to a Raspberry pi, PC/Mac, etc.).

I found this experience to be fantastic and enjoyed the build. Now to get it into the teen area at my church and let the students enjoy a little retro action! G
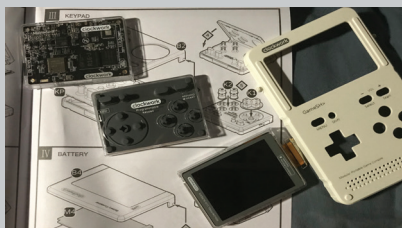
recroommasters.com

# GameShell by ClockworkPi

## YOU CAN BUILD IT... I DID!

### By Old School Gamer

**M**y interest in the GameShell began when I heard about it back in November 2017, right as Old School Gamer was in its infancy. I often find myself backing many retro gaming related products that I see popping up on crowdfunding sites, especially on Kickstarter, which was also the case then. At around $149, this is a handheld gaming unit running on a variant of Linux that looks like an original Gameboy in size and feel. But what is different about this is that you are assembling it yourself. I'll tell you, I thoroughly enjoyed going through the experience. It took me about 90 minutes to complete it, and, incredibly, it worked the first time I turned it on.

It comes as a modular system including a mainboard, keypad, screen, battery and speaker, with outer shell pieces, wires and buttons needing to be assembled as well. It came in fantastic packaging, way beyond what I expected, and very well organized. The instructions were well done and easy to follow, making the construction of the GameShell unit an enjoyable experience. The pieces were well labeled, and I only found myself scratching my head once on a set of interconnect cables between the units. Once I looked it up, it was obvious which went where. Unlike similar products that I've tried to put together, this requires no soldering or worrisome assembly. Everything can be undone if you don't like the way it comes together. The only part that I really spent any time on tweaking was the way the cables ran between the various modules and inside the main shell.

And now onto the software and the OS that they have pre-installed into your system. One of your first tasks is to log into your home Wi-Fi network, which is accomplished by going into Settings, selecting Wi-Fi and the network you want to be on, put in your password and it connects. Go into TinyCloud and you will see Wi-Fi logins and an IP address, as it has set itself up as a Host. Using an FTP client or a Windows browser, then typing in the right login information that you are provided on the main screen of the TinyCloud application, you will see a directory of where you can put your ROMs.

For legality's sake, I have only installed games for which I already own the arcade machine, for the MAME emulator (Gauntlet), and NES ROMs from cartridges I own (Super Mario Bros 1&3, and Thexder). Putting them in the right format, for instance the NES files need to be in .zip format, is key. When it finds the first valid rom file, it will perform an auto install of extra files it needs through your Wi-Fi connection. One thing to note is that on the MAME (arcade games) files, you need to have an older version of the ROM file (check the online documentation for further guidance).

This is an open system and not for people that just want a "pick up and go" gaming system. For those seeking such a system, there are many other manufacturers building similar products. For me, this was an exciting project, mainly because I built it! On the manufacturer's support boards, people are talking about installing other emulators, the fun they are having on FreeDM (Doom), how to further hack the unit, and more. Based on the crowdfunding site, there appears to be over 3,000 users and there is a great community coming up for this system. Currently they are finishing up fulfilling all their backers' orders. Look to be able to order yours at their website below soon! This was most certainly $149 well spent! 🎮

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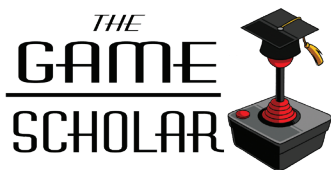1200 mAh rechargeable battery

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# Reading the Classics

## FROM BACK IN THE DAY TO TODAY

### By Leonard Herman, the Father of Video Game History

Ever since the world's first two videogame magazines, Great Britain's Computer and Video Games and the United States' Electronic Games, debuted two weeks apart in November 1981, printed videogame magazines have basically come in four flavors.

*General:* The majority of gaming magazines fell under this category and covered all aspects of gaming, including handhelds, and in many cases, computer games. Some of the most popular magazines, including Electronic Games, Electronic Gaming Monthly (EGM), and the aforementioned Game Informer, fall into this category.

*Company-specific:* This is a magazine that is basically propaganda for the hardware manufacturer and focuses primarily on the games and systems that the company has to offer. Nintendo Power, which was for the most part published by Nintendo, is probably the most well-known example of a company-specific magazine.

*Console-specific:* This type of magazine was usually printed by an independent publisher but was supported in part by the console's manufacturer. As the name implies, it usually focused on news and reviews for games and peripherals for the specific console that it covered. Some console-specific magazines were even packaged with discs that contained playable samples of upcoming games. The most popular of the console-specific magazines was the Official U.S. PlayStation Magazine.

*Retro Gaming:* This is basically a subset of the general format except that it only covers consoles and games that are usually more than 25 years old. Some general magazines, including Game Informer and GamesTM offered monthly retro sections. The new kid on the block, Old School Gamer Magazine, falls into this category. The number of retro gaming magazines that have appeared can be counted on one hand.



The first magazine that was devoted strictly to retro gaming wasn't even a professional magazine at all. Classic Gamer Magazine, which debuted in the Fall of 1999, was the self-published brainchild of Chris Cavanaugh, a long-time fan of the original Electronic Games magazine and its editors, Bill Kunkel, Arnie Katz and Joyce Worley. The magazine's articles were interesting and well written, and its format was similar to the beloved Electronic Games. By the end of its eight-issue run, it even included Bill Kunkel as a columnist. Despite its self-published status, the magazine could be found for sale in Tower Records stores. Classic Gamer Magazine could be considered a fore-runner to Old School Gaming Magazine. Three of its contributors, myself, Michael Thomasson and Brett Weiss, are regular columnists for this magazine. Classic Gamer Magazine lasted for six issues, with the final edition dated Spring, 2001. However, Cavanaugh issued two free digital-only editions, Volume 2, issues 1 and 2 in April and July of 2004 respectively. And then after a six-year hiatus, the first issue of volume 3 was released in the fall of 2010, also as a free digital download. Although a new issue hasn't been published in eight years, those of us who still view Classic Gamer Monthly as one of the best independent magazines ever available on the subject, are still hopeful that a new one will again suddenly appear.

The first professional magazine about retro games was the British Retro Gamer, which carried a January, 2004 cover date. The first ten issues of this over-sized magazine came with a CD full of shareware games.

In the United States, several slick retro-themed magazines were published over the years, following the success of Retro Gamer. The first was Manci Games, which claimed to be the "First Retro VideoGame Magazine & Price Guide!". Manci Games also introduced two columns that continue today in Old School Gaming Magazine, Michael Thomasson's "Just 4 Qix" and my own "The Game Scholar".



Editor-in-Chief Jansen Mercer had big plans for this magazine, which was actually named for his goal. He hoped that the success of the magazine would eMANCIpate him from his corporate job. Alas, the magazine only lasted two issues.

With a cover date of summer 2004, Video Game Collector, debuted shortly after Manci Games. Published by Shawn Paul Jones, this full-color magazine was small-sized (7" x 9.25" – a standard magazine size is 8.5" x 11") and forty-six pages in length. Half of this was dedicated to the price guide, the rest featured reviews of retro games and articles of interest to classic game fans. Each issue also featured a Collector's Spotlight, and the spotlight of the first issue was centered on a Youtube star, the Immortal John Hancock. The magazine went to full-size with issue 5. The magazine lasted 11 issues, with the final

issue being undated but released in 2009.

Video Game Trader, which debuted in late 2007, actually began as a price guide. But the second issue, Volume 2 issue 1, which was published in February 2008, was a full-fledged magazine. Video Game Trader followed an unusual schedule. It was to be published monthly, but would only be available as downloads, except for the quarterly issues (numbers 4,8, etc.), which were available in print. The dimensions of the print editions were even smaller than the original Video Game Collector, coming in at 5.5" x 8.5". Beginning with #9, the magazine was available in print every month, and beginning with issue 13, it went to the standard magazine size. I joined the magazine as editor with issue 13, a position I held for 10 issues. Afterward, the magazine switched back to a download edition only, then stopped publishing after issue 35. However, 35 issues wasn't bad for a magazine that wasn't available on newsstands. It holds the record of being the longest running retro gaming magazine in the United States (to date).

By October, 2013, most of the mainstream videogame magazines in the United States were gone. Gamepro expired in December, 2011, Nintendo Power one year later, and finally Electronic Gaming Monthly in March, 2013. Only Game Informer, which was subsidized by Gamestop, remained. Meanwhile, it was the complete opposite in Great Britain, where videogame magazines thrived. Edge was going strong for over twenty years. GamesTM was about to celebrate its twelfth birthday. And even the retro-themed Retro Gamer was thriving after nearly ten years.

Because of the success of print publications in England, Mike Kennedy, who in March 2008 had founded Game Gavel, an online videogame auction site that provided an alternative to eBay, believed that a print magazine with the right talent and quality could also succeed in the United States.

Kennedy's idea was to assemble many well-known writers from classic videogaming magazines, such as Electronic Gaming Monthly, to produce Retro, a high-quality print magazine that would be aimed towards sophisticated gaming fans of all ages. He began a Kickstarter campaign on October 4, 2013, that sought to raise $50,000. And although many people scoffed at the idea of a new print magazine in a digital age, by the end of the campaign, 2,345 backers had pledged nearly $76,000, which proved that there was a definite interest in such a magazine. In addition, a digital version of the magazine was offered. All print subscriptions included free digital editions, and the digital copies could also be subscribed separately.

The first issue came out in January, 2014. By the end of the year, Kennedy claimed that Retro's circulation was 40,000 readers from 35 different countries. Unfortunately, Retro's release schedule was erratic, and even when issues were printed, many subscribers complained that they never received them.

Despite this problem, Retro may have succeeded. The magazine was carried in Barnes and Noble, which exposed it to thousands of casual magazine readers. Unfortunately, publisher Mike Kennedy decided to overextend himself by announcing a new game console called the Retro Video Game System. This system, and its follow up, the Coleco Chameleon, became the laughing stocks of the retro videogaming community, and Kennedy's reputation in the industry evaporated. In July, 2017, VGBrands, the parent company of Piko Interactive, a developer of new games for old systems, announced that they had purchased the rights to Retro magazine and Game Gavel and that a new issue of Retro would be available in the fall. However, the magazine would only be available in digital format, and if demand for a print edition existed, then a print version would be published. As promised, the digital edition of issue 13 was released in October. Piko Interactive then announced at that time that a print edition of the magazine would be available through Patreon if $5,000 (1,500 subscribers) could be pledged. That issue was finally delivered in July 2018, a year after it was first announced. Now with issue 13 in the can, there has been no word about the digital version of issue 14, which is worrisome, since nearly a year has passed since the last digital issue had been available.



Fortunately, there is Old School Gamer Magazine (OSGM), which you are reading now, to fill the gap left by Retro. Founded by Ryan Burger, a successful magazine publisher and game collector, at the end of 2017, OSGM had a similar mission as Retro, to cover games and systems that were more than 25 years old. In addition, the magazine featured articles on retro arcade gaming, something rarely covered in modern magazines. The magazine has consistency from issue to issue, with regular columnists, a free poster of that issue's cover art and a price guide for games to a different retro console each issue.

OSGM followed a different business model than that of Retro. In this case, digital subscriptions were absolutely free. And to get the word out, Burger and his writers attended most videogame conferences to sign up new subscribers. A physical copy of the magazine was handed out for free with every digital subscription placed, and then the subscriber had the option to purchase a physical subscription.

The magazine launched in November, 2017, and follows a bi-monthly schedule, with one new issue being published every other month.

As the world continues to shift to digital, it is refreshing that some publishers recognize that not all readers are interested in this form of delivery. It is fitting that a magazine that covers classic games, also publishes in a classic format. 🕹G

**Leonard Herman**, The Game Scholar, is regarded as one of the earliest and most respected videogame historians. The first edition of his book Phoenix: The Fall & Rise of Home Videogames, which was published in 1994, is considered to be the first serious and comprehensive book about the history of videogames. He has written articles for Videogaming & Computer Illustrated, Games Magazine, Electronic Gaming Monthly, the Official U.S. PlayStation Magazine, Pocket Games, Classic Gamer Magazine, Edge, Game Informer, Classic Gamer Magazine, Manci Games, Gamespot.com and Video Game Trader, which he also edited. In 2003, Mr. Herman received a Classic Gaming Expo Achievement Award in recognition for his accomplishments in documenting game history.

# Interview with Video Games Monthly

by Jonathan Polan

**V**ideo Games Monthly is a monthly subscription service that delivers video games to gamers who own classic gaming systems from the 1980's-2000's. Play the past into the future!

**OSG:** *Can you tell us about the origins of Video Games Monthly?*

**VGM:** The concept actually came about one day when a few of us were sitting around and thinking how great it would be if we could collect video games and not have to leave our house? So, we took it one step further and decided it would be best if the games were just delivered to our door. Thus, Video Games Monthly was born and we gave retro and new gamers an opportunity to build and expand upon their gaming collection.

**OSG:** *Is it true that you carry titles for systems going back to the 80's?*

**VGM:** Absolutely! From the Atari 2600 up to the Wii U, there are over 20 systems to choose from! Plus, we are constantly adding new games and systems. In fact, make sure to stay tuned on social media for some big announcements in the coming month!

**OSG:** *What kind of games can members expect to find in their boxes each month?*

**VGM:** The games run the gamut! Are you a RPG lover? We got games for you! Racing? Fighting? Adventure? Got you covered! Whether you're about to embark on your journey through Hyrule or ride your first Warthog, you can be sure that the games in your box are tailored to your preferences. No two boxes are alike, which makes it even more exciting to see what members post on our social media pages each month! Also, you can be sure to never receive yearly sports titles!

**OSG:** *What is the condition of the cartridges/discs that are sent out?*

**VGM:** Every single game is tested prior to being shipped out. We pride ourselves on quality and ensuring that once your box arrives, it's ready to be played!

**OSG:** *For those who have yet to sign up, how does the process work?*

**VGM:** It's as simple as the Contra code! All you have to do is go to www.videogamesmonthly.com, pick a plan that suits your gaming need and then wait for the beginning of each month to arrive to receive your box. Our plans range from 3 games a month up to 10 games! Plus, by selecting the systems you want games for and maintaining your library of games, you're sure to never get duplicate titles or games for systems you don't own. Now for the best part.... YOU KEEP THE GAMES!

Thank you again to Video Games Monthly for taking the time to share about their business. Make sure to sign up today! 🅖

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Videogamesmonthly.com

**Jonathan Polan** - Jonathan has been a gamer since the mid 80s when his dad introduced him to the Odyssey 2. Since then, there hasn't been a console missed, but his love always returns to Nintendo. So much that Jonathan has made it a personal mission to collect an entire U.S. library of Nintendo Switch games, plus some import exclusives! In addition to raising two future gamers, he also previously was the PR & Marketing Director/Interviewer for The Switch Effect and is currently the interviewer for Gaming Boulevard. His ultimate goal is to run Marketing & PR for video game developers to help promote and bring their games to market!