

Classic Home Video Games,
1985–1988

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ALSO BY BRETT WEISS

Classic Home Video Games, 1972–1984:
A Complete Reference Guide (McFarland, 2007)

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Classic Home Video Games, 1985–1988

A Complete Reference Guide

BRETT WEISS

Foreword by BILL KUNKEL

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McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers
Jefferson, North Carolina, and London

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGUING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Weiss, Brett, 1967–
Classic home video games, 1985–1988 : a complete reference guide /
Brett Weiss ; foreword by Bill Kunkel.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-7864-3660-6

illustrated case binding : 50# alkaline paper ∞

1. Video games—History. I. Title.
GV1469.3.W472 2009 794.809 — dc22 2009016502

British Library cataloguing data are available

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Cover images: Digital Vision and Shutterstock ©2009

Manufactured in the United States of America

*McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers
Box 611, Jefferson, North Carolina 28640
www.mcfarlandpub.com*

To Mike, Kelly, Chris, and Cara Davis,
whose love and support through the years
have had an immeasurable impact on my life

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Special thanks to my lovely (and loveable) wife, Charis Weiss, who helped me with the many computer conundrums that occurred during the writing of this book. Special thanks also to Ryan and Katie Weiss, who provide a constant source of inspiration, love, and amusement.

Special thanks also goes to Bill Kunkel, co-founder of *Electronic Games Magazine*; Rick Kelsey, friend and fellow writer; Leonard Herman, author of *Phoenix: The Fall & Rise of Videogames*; David Kaelin, owner of Game Over Videogames; Buddy Saunders, owner of Lone Star Comics and mycomicshop.com; Thomas Sansone, editor of *Video Game Trader Magazine*; Chris “Cav” Cavanaugh, editor for the *All Game Guide*; Michael Thomasson, owner of Good Deal Games; Earl Green, who runs the logbook.com; Jesse Hardesty, the man behind the Oklahoma Video Game Exhibition; Bart Bush, key member of the Oklahoma Alliance of Fandom; Roy Thomas, editor of *Alter Ego* magazine; and *Digital Press* editor Joe Santulli and all the guys (and gals) who contribute to the always lively Digital Press message boards.

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FOREWORD

by Bill Kunkel

More than any other companies in the history of electronic gaming, Nintendo, Sega, and later Sony established video games as a lifestyle, a hobby that would endure beyond the “video game craze” of the ’70s. Following the Great Implosion of ’83, as the Age of Atari crumbled, game console and software sales tanked and American industry and retail alike closed the coffin lid on the video game as a viable entertainment format and shoveled on the dirt.

In their heart of hearts, after all, most American retailers and even many executives within the industry itself had always viewed the video game boom as a fad. Throughout the entire mid-’80s, the only place most Americans played electronic games was on computers or at the arcades. And the only games the computers offered were coin-op derivatives or text (and later illustrated and even animated) RPGs and adventure games. For most Americans, video games were now perceived as the carrot-on-the-stick gateway to the computer-in-every-household world that many people thought would take place 20 years before it actually occurred.

But the Japanese never lost faith. Japanese coin-op manufacturers had, in many ways, helped create the second generation American video game boom (i.e., the Age of Atari) with games like *Space Invaders* and *Pac-Man* and they saw no diminution of interest among Japanese gamers.

Simultaneously, a phrase was beginning to permeate the world of seven-disk computer games: “tolerable delays in loading new content.” The incredible range of power among even the same company’s microcomputers as well as a labyrinth of audio and video augmentation boards that made system/software compatibility an issue in every purchase (“I can buy this really cool-looking game, but it’s going to play like crap on my computer. If it plays at all.”). Then there was the question of whether software publishers should be making “games” at all, when they could concentrate their efforts on the more academic-sounding “simulations.”

And all of it took that phrase from a murmur to a command. That phrase was plug ’n’ play.

The old joys of ripping a plastic-encased game board directly out of the box, putting it into your game system and seeing it on the TV suddenly acquired a nostalgic appeal. Moreover, computer gaming was, and remains, a socially isolated experience. Online play has long allowed computer gamers to test their skills against gamers in remote locations, but the key word there was “remote.” People began to remember how much fun it had been to play against their brother, sister, parents, and friends head-to-head in the most comfortable room in the house on a TV screen that was almost certainly larger than your computer monitor.

All of these things converged when Nintendo brought its Nintendo Entertainment System (complete with a dorky robot that was eliminated from the system with appropriate swiftness) and Sega introduced its Sega Master System to America. Video games were once again embraced as part of a lifestyle, as fixed a member of the pop cultural pantheon as pop music, movies, and comic books. There will be good years and bad years, we realized, but the idea of the video game itself as a staple of popular entertainment was here to stay.

The Nintendo/Sega (and later Sony) era revolutionized the concept of what you could do with video games. Elaborate, action-driven adventures joined the video game landscape and the platform and scrolling shooter genres became the dominant categories. After all, the Nintendo/Sega era redefined the nature of gaming by transitioning gamers from a joystick-driven, one or two action button para-

digm to the “joypad,” an interface that all but demanded an endless diet of platformers. For the first time, the idea of multiple action buttons (direction was now controlled with the left hand via the directional joypad) and the timing required in pushing them became the driving force behind most games of this period. Movement was largely confined to North-East-South-West commands and the trick was in perfectly timing a jump over a ravine or onto a mushroom.

The Nintendo/Sega (and later Sony) era taught us to once again love video games and, to this day, Nintendo and Sony remain the world’s most successful producers of video game hardware. So take a stroll back through the mid and late ’80s, when a new voice and a new culture took back the right to enjoy video games.

Take it away, Brett...

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Bill Kunkel (AKA The Game Doctor) and his partner Arnie Katz “invented” video game journalism in Video magazine in 1978 and then, with Katz and Joyce Worley, created Electronic Games in 1981. Kunkel has designed games, consulted, written numerous game strategy books, and served as an expert witness in much of the industry’s seminal litigation. His memoirs, Confessions of the Game Doctor, were published in 2006, and he’s a regular columnist at J2Games.com.

PREFACE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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