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Old video games often reflected society's mind-set, exhibit shows

By Tom Maurstad / The Dallas Morning News

Like a song that once blasted from the car radio on those long-gone Friday nights, like a forgotten television commercial you haven't seen in years, they are powerful portals to the past.

Long before Nintendo, Sega and others turned TVs into electronic playgrounds, arcades were where gamers sought their thrills. And the video games that filled those arcades are the latest hot zone in our culture's continuing nostalgia craze.

For baby boomers, trudging through middle age, names such as Asteroids, Defender and Space Invaders are passwords to adolescent days spent feeding quarters into a machine while trying to clear a room of marauding robots.

There is, of course, the visceral rush of rediscovering what are now referred to as "classic" video games, all those familiar screens and graphics that by today's high-tech standards seem sticks-and-stones primitive.

Not surprisingly, in an era when nostalgia is big business, home video-game makers such as Hasbro and Activision are scrambling to release versions of all the classics. Frogger and Battlezone are already available, and Centipede is due sometime this fall. On the Internet, meanwhile, Web sites such as www.gamepower.com/mame/mame.html are brimming with bootleg knockoffs.

But as it turns out, classic video games offer more than just kitchy kicks. As an exhibit just opened at The Science Place demonstrates, video games - those silly symbols of misspent youth - are important and revealing artifacts. Walking through "Videotopia: The Ultimate Arcade," the time-worn cabinets burbling their choruses of bleeps and bloops offer resonant reminders of where we've been and how we got here.

"I started this project in 1992 in large part because I was troubled by how poorly video-game history was being represented," says Keith Feinstein, Videotopia's creator. "There was almost nothing written, no research, and what little you did find was just plain wrong.

"My fear was the wrong history would become ingrained, which would be a massive disservice to society. Video games are the reason we're living in the world of computers

and the Internet. Nobody was buying home computers to do spreadsheets. Games are what drove technology and the computer market.

"Playing video games is how computers got disseminated into popular culture."

With its That Was Then/Then Is Now format, Videotopia presents a compelling illustration of computer technology's evolution as games advanced from the boxy basics of the first generation to the supersleek wonders of today's offspring.

For anyone who has waded through the volumes of rules, instructions and scene-setting explanations accompanying most video games these days, the universes of change we have blurred through are summed up by reading the instructions to Pong.

Released in 1972, the electronic tennis game is mistakenly considered by many to be the first video arcade game. (Computer Space came out a year earlier, but it was difficult to play and not much fun, so few played it and fewer remember it). But Pong was the first successful video game, and the cultural sensation it ignited began with precisely two lines and eight words of instruction: "Deposit quarter. Avoid missing ball for high score."

As Videotopia's collection goes on, black-and-white bursting into color, crude outlines becoming ever more complex characters and a flat two-dimensional world adding an eye-tricking third dimension, an archaeological time line tracing the computer's development is created. You may have to be a tech head to understand the function of such things as microprocessors and ROMs, but you don't have to be one to appreciate the differences they make.

In one of the exhibit's most striking displays, the 1974 game Tank stands beside its 1995 counterpart, Tokyo Wars. Tank has a flat, monochromatic field where a tiny white tank battles a tiny black tank amid a field of featureless obstructions. Tokyo Wars, on the other hand, is a full-color spectacle where realistically detailed tanks rumble through a 3-D re-creation of Tokyo. On the surface, the former is a rinky-dink skateboard, the latter a supercharged rocket sled. But beneath the surface, the games are identical in game play and goal - maneuvering a tank through a maze, trying to blow up the enemy tanks while avoiding a similar fate.

The real revelation of Videotopia's collection of classic games has nothing to do with computers. Video games, it turns out, aren't just technological artifacts; they are cultural signposts, remaining as electronic embodiments of long-gone moments.

Take, for example, Missile Command. The player tries furiously to protect three cities while missiles rain down from satellites and planes. There is no winning, and the best you can hope for is the highest score. The games always end the same way: your cities wiped out, a screen-filling explosion and the bleak summation, "Game Over."

It is, in other words, perhaps the purest distillation ever of nuclear paranoia.

"When that game came out in 1980," Mr. Feinstein says, "Reagan was president and the nuclear clock was at two minutes till midnight. As a sign in the exhibit explains, it was inspired when Atari's president read an article about killer satellites. It's original name was Armeggedon, and the three cities were three American cities. But they decided that was just too horrifying.

"But it's still the perfect representation of that Cold War mind-set we all lived under: It was all defense, no offense, and you couldn't win."

Again and again throughout the exhibit, the cultural resonance of video games is highlighted, as it is in the case of Centipede. A placard explains that Centipede - in which the player shoots at a field including a descending centipede, a herky-jerky spider and a bunch of mushrooms - was the first arcade game to appeal more to women than men. Not coincidentally, it was also the first arcade game created by a woman designer. To further embellish the game's cultural context, the exhibit notes that 1981, the year of Centipede's debut, was also the year that Sandra Day O'Connor became the first woman appointed to the Supreme Court.

"People think about video games the way they used to think - and the way some still do think - about television," says Tim Burke, a history professor at Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania. "They think of them as empty, juvenile, valueless and mind-draining. But there is an incredible richness there for anyone interested in what society is thinking and feeling.

"In the same way cultural critics have examined all those trashy monster movies from the '50s to get at what was going at the time, you can look at video games from the '70s and '80s. The fact is, you can tell a lot more about what people were thinking by looking at the cultural detritus of a period.

"So many were about fighting aliens, trying to find a safe place or protecting your home - these were the resonant themes of the times. And in video games, you see the roots of geek culture, the community that would go on to create the Internet. That's Bill Gates' secret life you see in all those supposedly stupid games."

Like a multimedia time machine, Videotopia offers the chance to retreat into a lost world. You can be whisked back to the cartoon chaos of Xenophobe, where your mission is "to seek out and destroy all hostile alien life forms." Or you can become a Defender, flying through enemy fire to rescue "Daddy," "Mommy" and "Mikey" from the clutches of - you guessed it - evil aliens.

But the history of video games isn't all doomsdays and accursed aliens. Players are free to choose in this universe of electronic worlds. All it takes is a token, and you can once again be a cute little frog hopping his way back home, treating yourself to a tasty, 200-point bug along the way.

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