Classic games make a comeback
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WHEN Rob O'Hara needs a serious video game fix, he unwinds a black rubber joystick and plays a few rounds of "Space Invaders" on his Atari 2600, vintage 1982. The 30-year-old networking engineer owns newer Xbox, PlayStation 2 and GameCube consoles, but for a true gaming geek like O'Hara, nothing tops the blocky graphics and simple sound effects of retro video games.

"Playing games was a big part of my childhood," he says. "Back then, it seems like games were more family-oriented, and as a result, families ended up playing a lot of games together."

O'Hara is no relic in his love of 1980s electronic nostalgia. Vintage consoles are plentiful on internet auction sites. An annual "Classic Gaming Expo" convention is growing, moving to larger quarters this year. And companies are trying to cash in with repackaged editions of classics including the space fighter "Defender" and the pill-munching "Pac-Man".

Nintendo recently released eight classic games for its portable Game Boy Advance, including "Super Mario Bros.", "The Legend of Zelda," and "Excitebike." Along with the $US20-apiece games, the company also released a $US100 Game Boy Advance system styled after its original Nintendo Entertainment System.

Jakks Pacific, meanwhile, sells a line of retro video game systems from classic game companies like Atari, Namco, Capcom and Activision. The $US20 battery-powered systems, first released two years ago, plug directly into televisions and resemble old-fashioned joysticks.

"Games like Pac-Man are still as compelling today as they were 30 years ago," said company spokeswoman Genna Goldberg. "There is a big nostalgia value."

Retro video gaming has become something of a pop culture phenomenon lately, with video game music and themes featured in US television commercials for Hummer and Saturn trucks. A top 20 R &B hit, "Game Over (Flip)" by Lil' Flip features sound effects from "Pac-Man".

It's not just nostalgia that's fuelling retro video interest, says O'Hara. He thinks the old games were simply more fun to play: "There's a phrase that's used a lot in marketing - "easy to learn, hard to master" - that describes most classic video games."

Gamers itching to relive their Atari, Colecovision and Intellivision days can find plenty of systems for about $US20 on internet auction sites like eBay. Many video game stores sell refurbished models for a bit more, about $US80.

You can even travel to game as a group.

Last year's Classic Gaming Expo drew over 1,400 attendees, and this year the August event is moving from Las Vegas to the San Jose, California, to accommodate larger crowds.
Expo spokesman Jayson Hill says there's a whole generation of older gamers who trashed their systems when they were kids. Now, they're feeling nostalgic and have some money to spend.

"There was a time when you could walk into any thrift store and pick up a game cartridge for 50 cents and systems for a couple of dollars," Hill said. "Those days are gone."

Many who go back and play the older games are often surprised, however, at the crudeness of the graphics, said Steven L. Kent, author of "The Ultimate History of Video Games."

The 1982 game "River Raid" is a good example, he said. Players fly a fighter jet over a river filled with ships and barges but "when you go back, you see that the river was a blue rectangle with lots of grey rectangles for boats."

"A lot of people look back on old games like a kind of Camelot. Only when you do, you see that the castle smelled, the food was rancid and the maidens were bloated."

*The Associated Press*

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