Getting Started with Retro Gaming

by Don Hartig

Ever felt that there is something missing in today's photorealistic, gritty, story-focused 3D games? Ever been frustrated with the seemingly never-ending paid DLCs that seem to be synonymous with modern gaming? Ever wondered why today's games are almost always fraught with bugs and are practically guaranteed to be incomplete when they first hit the shelves?

Maybe retro gaming is for you.

What is retro gaming? **Retro gaming is the playing or collecting of games that were designed and developed for older consoles, PCs, or arcade machines that were released between 1972 and 1994. Things that are most commonly associated with retro gaming are classic (also known as "old-school") games, game cartridges, consoles, controllers and other hardware, pixel art and chiptune music.**

Retro gaming has always been a huge passion (ok, more like an addiction) for me, and I had a lot of fun writing this article. In the sections that follow, I explain why retro gaming is so popular, introduce the ways in which retro games are played today, and provide various options for getting into the awesome world of retro gaming. There will even be a personal recommendation at the end of this article, just in case you can't wait to start playing those classics from the golden age of gaming right away. Read on to find out more!

Why retro gaming?

There are many reasons why retro gaming is an increasingly popular form of entertainment and relaxation to more and more people around the world. Whether it be seasoned gamers that grew up playing the classics, younger gamers, or newcomers to gaming in general, retro gaming is no longer just a niche hobby for nerds and is undoubtedly here to stay.

With modern games today, gamers often feel that they are playing an increasingly insignificant part in the progression of the games themselves as most big gaming companies continue to focus on improved graphics, special effects and storyline instead of trying to provide challenging or unique gameplay.

Retro games, on the other hand, particularly those from the NES and SNES/SEGA GENESIS era, were designed to be more challenging (for reasons we will explore later) and were made with a focus on gameplay and player satisfaction, which gives them much higher replay value, even today.

For these and other reasons, gamers are returning to classic "old-school" games in droves, as more and more of them discover that, although games from this era are generally much simpler in terms of design, they are almost always more challenging and thus provide more satisfaction when they are finally beaten.

Many gamers (and even artists) today also find that the unique "pixel art" aesthetic that has its roots in retro gaming (again, due to hardware limitations at the time) leaves a lot more to the imagination than today's photorealistic 3D games, something which modern research has found to have a direct link to player satisfaction.

Another aspect of retro gaming, that makes it so attractive, is the fact that it is so affordable. Even if you choose to buy the official versions of retro gaming hardware, such as the **Sega Genesis Mini**, the **SNES Classic**, or the **Capcom Home Arcade,** you will still only be paying a fraction of what it would cost you to buy a new PS5 or XBox Series X.

The simplicity of the plug-and-play nature of retro gaming, and the fact that no internet connection or downloads are required to play retro games, are two more reasons why many gamers today, including those that did not grow up playing what are today considered retro games, are finding more and more joy in them.

Last, but definitely not least, retro games do not try to sell you any DLCs and have no ongoing expenses to try to keep you playing them, which means that their cost to enjoyment ratio is much higher.

Gamers are beginning to realise these as well as other factors and, in some cases, are ditching their Xboxes and Ryzen graphics cards in favour of retro gaming consoles.

If you are new to the world of retro gaming, here are some fundamental concepts to understand about this awesome form of entertainment.

Retro gaming on old hardware — meet the retro gaming purists

Some retro gamers are more than happy to just sit down at their PCs or laptops and play **Super Mario** or **The Legend of Zelda** for a few hours to relax – and to them, this is retro gaming.

However, many retro gaming purists believe that "true" retro gaming means only original cartridges and hardware (which includes CRT monitors) should be used for the best gaming

experience. Granted, many of these "retro gaming elitists", as they are sometimes called, grew up playing retro games in this way, and it is definitely understandable that to them the nostalgia is an important factor to the experience as a whole. Personally, however, the fun I get out of retro gaming is in the games themselves, and not in the collecting of cartridges and vintage hardware.

Nevertheless, the purist retro gaming market and community are definitely real, and there are countless retro gaming conventions all over the world every year.

As far as the actual value of old cartridges goes, some old games, especially very rare ones, and some that were only released in specific regions, such as Japan, fetch thousands of euros for an original copy. Super rare ones, like "**King of Fighters 2000**" by Neo-Geo, auction for **€3400** to **€5000** and **Gamma-Attack**, for the Atari 2600, is valued at a whopping **€426000** for an original cartridge. So if you happen to have one of these lying around, they could be your ticket to that new green Lambo you've had your eye on recently. To be perfectly honest though, some of these rare games are not even that good, or are just downright awful in terms of gameplay (in my own humble opinion), but that does not detract from their value as collectors' items and investments.

New retro gaming hardware

There are basically three types of new hardware for retro gaming:

- Official consoles (usually released as "classic" editions of old consoles)
- Unofficial (third-party) consoles
- DIY devices that use emulators and ROMs

Let us take a look at each type in detail.

Official retro gaming consoles

These consoles generally ship with a few dozen classic games and prove, without a doubt, the increasing popularity of retro gaming, since gaming companies like Nintendo and Sega are clearly willing to invest money into the R&D, design, manufacturing, marketing and shipping of these devices. Some examples of popular new retro gaming consoles are:

- SEGA Genesis Mini
- SNES Classic
- Capcom Home Arcade
- Playstation Classic
- Nintendo Switch (not designed specifically for retro gaming but can play classic Nintendo games if you have a paid **Nintendo Switch Online** membership)

- NES Classic
- Atari Flashback X (there are many versions in the Flashback series, including portable ones)

Third-party retro gaming hardware

If you are willing to use unofficial hardware (and potentially commit a crime in doing so) there are also countless options in terms of third-party products, many of which provide a much wider variety of games that you can play on them by default. As I do not want to get into trouble for making it seem like I am promoting unofficial retro gaming hardware, I will not provide any specific examples here, but a simple Google search will quickly produce dozens of links to third-party retro gaming consoles, the quality of which ranges from absolutely awesome to absolute trash.

There are now even a number of hardware manufacturers, such as **Castlemania Games**, that specialise in the manufacture of component cables, adaptors, converters and other accessories for retro gaming hardware. These components can be used to make retro gaming hardware (including original old consoles) compatible with modern monitors and provide the best possible image and sound quality while playing.

DIY retro gaming

Again, with this method you may be venturing into illegal territory if the games you intend to play are not listed as *freeware* by the companies that originally published them, so do bear this in mind.

This is probably the cheapest option if you have some technical skills or like tinkering with hardware. Probably the most common form of DIY retro gaming can be seen with the **Raspberry Pi** SBC (Small Board Computer) boards, which are fully-functional PCs that can be bought for as little as **€32** on Amazon and elsewhere. These little bad boys are the size of credit cards (yes, they really are that small) and can run various versions of Linux. For beginners, the standard **Raspberry Pi OS** is the most simple to set up but there are several Linux operating systems that are specifically optimised for retro gaming on the Raspberry Pi, including **Retropie**, **Recalbox**, **Lakka** and **Batocera**.

SBC boards can even be converted into dedicated retro gaming "consoles" if that is all you intend to use them for, and hundreds of Raspberry Pi retro gaming accessories, such as cases, controllers, and even arcade machine frames, can be bought from a number of online vendors.

Emulation

There are basically two types of emulators when it comes to playing retro games:

emulator software that you run on your PC and emulator websites (online emulators).

Emulator software

Emulator software enables gamers to run so-called "ROMs" (games that are packaged in special file formats to be able to run in specific emulators) and emulates the original hardware that they were designed for. Emulator software programs, such as Retroarch, MAME, and others, are run on PCs and can be configured to work with button controllers and other retro gaming hardware, but map player functions, such as "run" and "jump", to keys on your keyboard by default.

It is important to note that technically emulators may only be used to play games that have been listed as *freeware* by their original publishers. Nevertheless, there are still dozens of sites that provide ROM download packages containing thousands of games, most of which are definitely still under licence.

Emulator websites

Emulator websites are probably the most common way that casual retro gaming fans access their favourite games of yesteryear. However, over the last few years, starting more or less around 2017, a huge number of crackdowns on emulator sites have been occurring and this is no doubt due to the fact that big companies (Nintendo, I'm looking at you) have realised that their retro games can be re-monetized by selling access to them via paid subscription plans and membership packages. Owning the licences to classic titles like **Mario Brothers** and **Sonic the Hedgehog** means that companies like Nintendo and SEGA can make these titles available on new devices (like the Nintendo Switch) or by shipping them on new official retro gaming hardware released by the respective companies themselves.

That being said, emulator sites can also be clunky, taking a long time to load, and are also quite spammy in many cases (they usually make their profits by flooding their pages with ads).

Well, I hope you enjoyed this look into the awesome world of retro gaming as much as I did writing about it. I don't know about you, but now I feel inspired to spend the rest of the day playing some good old **Contra**: **Alien Wars**.

If you'd like to try out or get into retro games the easy (and legal) way and start playing dozens of the classics at a very affordable price, you can pick up two of my favourites, the official **Sega Genesis Mini** or the **Capcom Home Arcade** (mentioned above) here. So check out the products in our retro game console section. The selection refreshes too every now and then.

Let me know if you would like me to write on any other topics, or would like reviews on specific consoles or games.

Until then, looking forward to the next one!

Don Hartig

Bio

Don Hartig is a technophile, futurist, world-renowned linguist and prolific writer.

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