

The Classics

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As I was thinking about innovation in video games recently, it got me thinking about something specific: what makes a video game a 'classic?' Why is Legend of Zelda a classic, but not Final Fantasy III? Why is Street Fighter a classic but not Mortal Kombat? Metal Gear, but not any of Tom Clancy's Rainbow Ghost Cells?

I could go on and list game after game that I consider classics and you could agree or you could disagree. That would make this a very long article indeed. Instead I thought I'd share with you the winning formula that I consider makes a game a 'classic.'

I've noticed two major similarities so-called 'classic games' have in common. They are innovative and they have mass-market popularity. That is, they were the first to do something. Others can improve on them, but the originals are still going to be more beloved because they were first.

It's like the Beatles or Velvet Underground to modern music; it all goes back to them. Think of what music fills Classic Rock stations across the country. Some of it would not do well if released today, since bands they influenced have made improvements in sound and production quality, amongst other factors. These staples of music history remain classic rock because they were the first to do it.

And so it is with video games. Pong will always be a Classic, for it was the first. Played today, it is still engaging – but wouldn't you rather be playing Arkanoid?

If viewed by a child today for the first time, Super Mario Bros. would be laughed at. Twenty years ago, however, it rattled my very soul when I first stumbled upon it at the Chucky Cheese's arcade. Up until that point, video games were so abstract that they required gigabytes of imagination just to translate the bizarre arrangement of shapes and lines. My Atari and my friend's Colecovision entranced us for hours with the barely recognizable ships and airplanes of Air-Sea Battle, or the walking AT-AT blobs of Empire Strikes Back. The hero of Pitfall (Harry) was barely recognizable as a man and when he left the screen, a new screen would have to load up. It was the antithesis of the side-scroller.

With the introduction of Super Mario Bros. we were presented with this cartoonish, side-scrolling environment that looked hand-drawn. The hero had a large nose and a moustache and could change size into an even more detailed character. He could interact with the environment by pounding blocks, bouncing on enemies spitting fireballs. When the NES became available that year, kids everywhere were all over it, myself included.

On the NES, The Legend of Zelda premiered. What other fantasy game was there that had the feel of text-based classics like Zork (which could easily be argued to be a classic, as well: the first fantasy-based text adventure), but with the immediacy of a graphical interface. You could upgrade your character and talk to others. It was every D&D nerd's dream come true; A combination of their treasured tabletop world with the shining new appeal of the arcade world. Would there be a Final Fantasy series without Zelda, really?

Similarly, all the incarnations of Metal Gear that have emerged in the past decade (Metal Gear Acid 2? Did we really need a Two?), are gripping and intense, satisfying to our cinematic senses. Where would they be without the original? A man with no weapons who must rely on stealth to pass each level transformed into a thrilling game play experience. Who would have thought cigarettes and cardboard boxes could save the world? This was as close to interactive reality-based

gameplay as it got back then.

And I won't even start on how Street Fighter II (few remember the lackluster original that barely even resembles its successors) ushered in the age of fighter games. Before that, nothing. On your knees, Mitsurugi!

I will admit that this article has become a 'back in my day...' rant of an old man. Then again, if being old were a deciding factor, then every game Midway ever put out would be a classic. Looking around the gaming landscape today it's possible to pick out some of the future classics. Katamari Damacy is a great example. It is innovative in its storyline and interactive environment. Seriously, who thinks of an unearthly Prince who rolls up everyday objects and landscapes into giant balls and then throws them into the sky to become stars? The art is completely stylized, giving it a feel of Picasso artwork come to life that has made it extremely unique in terms of game design.

(I could write an entire article on how innovation in this day and age requires either being completely high or Japanese, but that's best left for another day)

Just being innovative isn't what makes this a 'modern classic' as they say. It has skyrocketed in popularity. It's not just with kids, who would seem to be the obvious intended market, who are talking about it. Everybody is talking about it. I've seen grown men get worked up talking about it with their buddies over drinks. Grown women force their reluctant boyfriends to sit down and watch the coolness in action.

What makes all the old school games I mentioned be classics is that you can talk about them with just about anyone. There is a shared connection. Strider was an awesome game, but so few people really got into it. Good luck bringing that up in conversation with the average individual. It didn't gain widespread appeal and therefore never truly became a 'classic' in the eyes of the general gaming populace.

So in closing, I leave you with what I consider the winning formula for establishing a classic game:

Unique Appeal + Widespread Audience Enjoyment + Time = Classic.

Agree? Disagree? Feel free to share with us your own thoughts on what games are classics, or what essential trait also makes a game a classic. I challenge you to take it to the next level, though, and think about what games that have come out in the past year are already on their way to claiming the title of 'classic.' That is the hard part, my friends.

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