# The Impending Demise of Video Game Packaging: An Eulogy

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Last year, when I was going to buy Cyan World's new adventure game OBDUCTION (2016), I was sad to learn that it was only being sold as a download; there would be no case to store on a shelf, no booklet, no physical packaging of any kind. I still don't like the idea that I don't own something I can look at and hold in my hand; I'm the same way when it comes to buying music on compact discs, and movies on Blu-ray discs, rather than as downloads. Perhaps it's a generational thing; I grew up during the days of video game cartridges, computer disks (even the big black square kind), and vinyl records, when album cover art was something you could hang on a wall. Packaging attracted you in the store, enticed you into buying something (or at least consider buying it), and exuded an attitude about what game was contained, usually hyping it up and exaggerating the action and excitement that you would supposedly experience; but back then everyone knew the graphics wouldn't live up to the box claims, you'd have to use your imagination to come anywhere even close to them.

Sure, buying online is much quicker and more convenient, but there was a sense of anticipation in waiting to buy a game, going to a store (maybe more than once, if you were still deciding or had to save up), shopping, getting it new and wrapped in plastic, and opening it up when the moment finally came. After that, you might see what it came packaged with, and even read the game manual (it is somewhat ironic that we read the game manuals in the days when the games were simpler, and not today when they are more complex; but of course, that has to do with the abstraction found in early

games, and the lack of established conventions, which nowadays allow one to pick up a game and start playing it without much trouble). There was anticipation at every stage of the experience.

Anticipation has changed, of course, but it still exists; due to the Internet and its ability to spread news about upcoming games, there is more advance notice and hype than ever before; you might find out an upcoming game a couple of years in advance of its actual release. So, in some ways, there is more anticipation these days, perhaps to even greater levels than before, considering the anticipation that fans had waiting for releases such as GRAND THEFT AUTO V (2013), NO MAN'S SKY (2016), and OBDUCTION itself; but it is also a different kind of anticipation (and you also anticipated and waited for games in the 1970s, whenever games were announced in advance). Most of all, though, I like owning a copy of the game, and not having to rely on the Cloud, or verification codes, or a reliable Internet connection; I can play it with or without an Internet connection, and no one can take it away or cancel my access to it. If Adobe software is any indication of the future, video games could one day be rented instead of purchased, or require a subscription like a streaming service. Or even function in a pay-per-play model, just like it was in the arcade, only you'd be charged at home on your own machine.

Of course, as anyone venturing into GameStop knows, there are still many games that come packaged; the shelves there are full of them. But how long will it last? Blockbuster Video survived thirteen years into the existence of Netflix, but they're gone today, despite a near-monopoly in the video rental industry. It depends partly on demand; if enough players are also video game collectors, physical, packaged copies of games will continue to be sold. And there's still peripherals and other game-related gear and merchandise that stores can sell, though that's no guarantee, either, that such stores will continue to flourish. Whatever may be the case, though, it seems likely that certain kinds of video game packaging, at least, are in their decline, and that packaging in general is unlikely to again serve some of the other purposes it once had.

## THE GOLDEN AGE OF VIDEO GAME PACKAGING

In the early days of video games, packaging had an important role, not just in the selling of games as physical products, but also in the promotion and advertising of video games in retail stores. Packaging attempted to draw the consumer's attention and entice potential players to purchase the game, promising excitement and experiences that were highly abstracted from what was depicted in the box art. Since graphics were still relatively crude, images on video game packaging, and even right on the cartridges themselves, tried to convince players of the exciting content the games supposedly contained, and included artistic conceptions of the game content to remind them what the blocky, pixelated figures were supposed to represent.

*Figure 1: Box claims versus actual screen graphics: packaging helped players interpret and imagine what the often sparse screen graphics were supposed to represent*


Source: SPIDER-MAN (1982), SUPER BREAKOUT (1978), COMBAT (1977)

Probably the best example of this are the cartridges made for the Atari VCS 2600, especially Atari's own cartridges, for the lavish art that graced boxes and the cartridges themselves. The box and cartridge art included with the games for the Atari VCS 2600 were particularly good at providing contexts that strove to give greater meaning to clusters of colored pixels, no matter

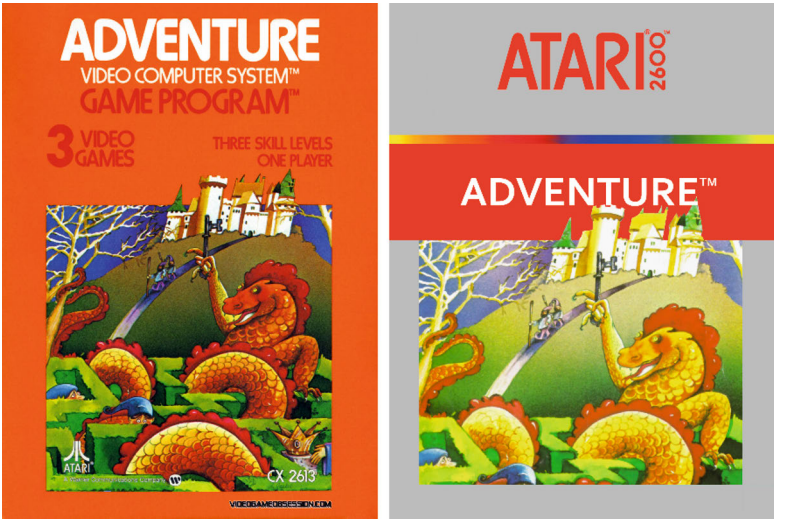
how outrageous a stretch was needed to do so (see Figure 1). Game manuals included with the games went even farther, giving narrative contexts to games even as abstract as SUPER BREAKOUT (1978).[1] Usually the images depicted people concentrating while engaged in physical activities; wielding weapons or sports equipment, using technology, driving vehicles, and more often than not, encountering challenges or even danger; quite the opposite, anyway, from sitting on the couch and manipulating a paddle or joystick (or, for a few games, a keypad), which was about the only physical activity that was expected of the player.

Cartridges for the Atari VCS 2600 originally had no images on them, only text on a black background; but soon they were given stickers which matched the box art. Often the box that the cartridge came in also contained an Atari catalog, where more box art was featured, along with additional catalog art tying it all together. Atari changed styles now and then; the original boxes were bright, solid colors, with the same familiar fonts like Harry Fat and Bauhaus Bold. The silver (with a strip of rainbow) Atari boxes and labels came in the 1980s (see Figure 2), after the solid-color designs that looked more 1970s (in retrospect). If you bought games and played Atari during those days, seeing both styles of the box art can give you almost visceral memories of what it was like to get new cartridges and play them at the time. This nostalgic feeling for the old designs, and the desire to know more about them, has led Tim Lapetino to produce the coffee-table book *The Art of Atari*, which features not only life-size reproductions of the box art, but the original artwork used, concept drawings, unused versions, and other art used in catalogs, advertisements, and arcade cabinets, with credit for each of the artists whose work was all done anonymously when the cartridges first appeared.[2] Other companies followed suit; Activision's cartridge boxes a look and feel that was very similar to the solid-color Atari box designs, and Imagic's packaging was silver with a series of stripes of rainbow colors, similar to Atari's later design scheme. Likewise, their box cover art was also more playful and detailed than the actual screen graphics would turn out to be.

1 Wolf, Mark J. P.: "Narrative in the Video Game," in: Wolf, Mark J. P. (ed.), *The Medium of the Video Game*, Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press 2001, pp. 93-112, here pp. 101-103.

2 Lapetino, Tim: *The Art of Atari*, Mount Laurel, NJ: Dynamite Entertainment 2016.

*Figure 2: Two different box designs for Adventure (1980) for the Atari VCS 2600*




Source: ADVENTURE (1980)

I have most of the packaging for most of the Atari cartridges I bought in the 1980s, and I even still have the box for the Atari 2600 console itself. We tended to keep the boxes for things; my mother collected Depression Glass and variety of other collectibles, including collector plates, which were popular in the 1970s and 1980s. A collectible plate was always worth more with the original box, and so my mother kept all the boxes in the basement, while the plates were on display on plate rails in the kitchen. This may have encouraged me to keep boxes as well, or perhaps I just liked them; either way, I still have them. When it comes to collectibles, many are often worth more with their original packaging, simply because the packaging is often rarer than the collectible itself; people tend to throw away packaging, and so preserved packaging can raise the value of a collectible. This seems to be the case for video games as well. One the highest prices paid for a copy of a video game occurred in 2017, when a sealed, unopened copy of Bandai's STADIUM EVENTS (1987) for the NES sold for $41,977. According to an article in Kotaku, a loose cartridge of the game is worth nearly $10,000, whereas a copy with its original box and manual can sell for more than

$20,000.[3] And even the packaging alone, and empty box without the cartridge, can still fetch over $10,000.[4] On auction websites like eBay, one can find games sold in their original packaging, and occasionally packaging is sold by itself as well. Anything that is really old and rare and still unopened is likely to remain unopened, as the unopened copy is perhaps the rarest kind of game. (And what kind of person would buy it and not open, over it all these years? That would seem to be an interesting story in and of itself…)

Packaging, then, also can attest to the authenticity of a product or game, especially when sealed in its original packaging which has never been opened, leaving the wrapped item in its pristine, untouched form, left as it was since it left the production line. For collectors, this condition is called "mint condition," referring to newly minted coins which have zero wear-and-tear from usage, and is the most desirably form that a collectible object can have. In such a case, the packaging becomes a part of the object. This relates, of course, to the game itself as an object. The earliest games were objects; hardwired into arcade cabinets or the consoles of home systems. In 1976, with the appearance of third-generation console technology which was cartridge-based, the game became a physical object on its own, apart from the system that played it (and, interestingly, movies also became available to consumers that same year, with the release of the video cassette recorder (VCR) and the tapes that it read).

But during the late 1970s and 1980s, the game-as-object began to be undermined by games stored on computer media like floppy disks, diskettes, and later CD-ROMs, and especially by on-line games, which could be downloaded and stored, without the user ever receiving anything physical to represent it. The game was now seen as the game code, not the plastic and metal containers that held the magnetic or solid-state materials in which the game code was stored. Interestingly, game-makers tried to make up for this loss of physicality through advancements in game packaging. The 1980s was the era of "feelies," the physical objects with which some computer games came

3 Kohler, Chris: "Rare NES Game Stadium Events Sells For Nearly $42,000," in: *Kotaku*, July 19, 2017; https://kotaku.com/rare-nes-game-stadium-events-sells-for-nearly-42-000-1797061312

4 According to Lammle, Rob: "8 Very Rare (and Very Expensive) Video Games," in: *Mental Floss*, January 3, 2011; https://www.cnn.com/2010/LIVING/03/20/mf.rich.off.video.games/index.html

packaged. Some adventure games, like ULTIMA IV: QUEST OF THE AVATAR (1985), came with a cloth map, and other games included such trinkets as small, metal figurines, runestones, hint booklets, and other items. Infocom was known for their "feelies" packaged with their text adventures; THE HITCHHIKER'S GUIDE TO THE GALAXY (1983), for example, came with a bag of pocket fluff, a "Don't Panic" button, Peril-sensitive sunglasses, and a little bag said to contain a microscopic space fleet too small to be seen by the naked eye.[5] Feelies, as they came to be called, were not merely included as a novelty to try to help games sales; they were also a means of combatting piracy, which was one of the consequences of games losing their objecthood and becoming too easy to copy. A cloth map included with an adventure game might contain a crucial clue that was not available within the game itself, meaning that a pirated copy of the game that did not feature the feelies was incomplete and could not be solved without the additional information.

In the 1990s, most games still came with game manuals, but some games made them into books, like Rusel DeMaria's novellas that came with STAR WARS: X-WING (1993) and STAR WARS: TIE FIGHTER (1994), or the 224-page book included with Lucasfilm's SECRET WEAPONS OF THE LUFTWAFFE (1991).[6] Even today, there are plenty of "collectors' editions" in oversize boxes which include metal figurines, game guides, soundtrack CDs, and other items, sometimes in a deluxe box as well (sometimes even a metal case), and always at a higher price than the other versions of the game. But only a relatively small number of games have such optional forms of packaging, while many do not, and an increasing number are available only as digital downloads.

## COLLECTING VIDEO GAMES

The idea of the video game as collectible goes beyond just the collecting of an object, of course. In the early days, kids could lend, borrow, or even trade cartridges, and eventually even sell them to secondhand stores, just as one

5 See Chalk, Andy: "Boxes, Feelies, and the Good Old Days of PC Gaming," in: *PC Gamer*, December 15, 2015, https://www.pcgamer.com/boxes-feelies-and-the-good-old-days-of-pc-gaming/

6 Ibid.

can buy and sell them at rummage sales or on auction sites like eBay. Even little pleasures, like lining up a stack of cartridges in a carrying case or arranging Atari's colored boxes on a shelf to form a spectrum of color, are things that are for the most part gone today. But, again, maybe this is all a generational thing; with well-established video game conventions and in-game tutorials, players learn a new game mainly by playing, and many games do not even have game manuals any more (except for third-party guides sold separately; but even then, YouTube videos or walkthroughs can likely be found, if help is needed). With digital music, movies, and games streaming into devices and everything stored in the Cloud, one's media collections are completely portable, and possibly even ever-changing, as renting replaces buying, and streaming services offer temporary usage that comes and goes as their offerings change. Unlike old books, music, and movies, older games (and by *old* I mean more than only a decade or so) often become unplayable on newer systems, and require old hardware, which may in turn require other old equipment (like CRTs with the right connections). Some are ported to newer systems, but only their blockbuster status warrants it, and even then, they are sometimes "updated" and no longer their original selves.

Of course, some will suggest that packaging was wasteful, and not ecologically sound, and it is true that the majority of it from past years probably ended up in the garbage. Video games have always been about giving players experiences, and packaging was only a part of that experience, one that many players perhaps even took, and continue to take, for granted. Like other obsolete technologies, video game packaging will never see the kind of heyday it once had at its peak, but neither will it ever disappear completely, so long as there are enough collectors to buy collectors' editions; maybe packaging will only be available as a collectible item, in a limited edition, which has to remain limited in order to remain collectible. Some collectors' editions can be quite elaborate; RESIDENT EVIL 7: BIOHAZARD COLLECTOR'S EDITION (2016) came with a small, detailed model house from the game, while the BIOSHOCK 10TH ANNIVERSARY COLLECTOR'S EDITION (2017) included an 11-inch statuette with lights, sound, and a motorized drill. Some of these special editions can cost hundreds of dollars, new, and once discontinued they may rise even higher in price. Whatever the case, video game packaging has been a part of the video game experience for a few generations of players, and has been something that they will not easily forget nor something that they would want to. And in a broader sense of term, "packaging" is still with

us, albeit in new forms that show off games and raise player's hope and anticipation, piquing their curiosity and giving them a peek at the game; like game trailers, which one can find so easily on-line. Patterned after movie trailers, with glimpses of action, enigmatic scenes and scenery, and emotional music designed to build the hype surrounding a game's release, game trailers are an effective way to advertise a game and spread the word about it.

*Figure 3: Virtual packaging for a variation of Doom Eternal (2020) depicting the new "Doomicorn" skin*


Source: DOOM ETERNAL (2020)

Some layer of marketing and hype will always necessarily exist between a game and its potential players, but the nature of that layer—whether a physical package, on-line images and trailers, cardboard stands for stores, or a marketing and advertising campaign that combines all of these—will remain something which can be enjoyed for itself, as a prelude to enjoying the game it promotes, beyond its importance to sales. Likewise, game-related collectibles will continue to take advantage of players' love for their games, regardless of the ever-changing forms they may take as well; and there are even forms of virtual packaging, like the fictitious box for DOOM ETERNAL (2020), which depicts the "Doomicorn" skin (see Figure 3). And those collectibles still around from decades ago will continue to rise in value, as they grow scarcer; they can only get older.

So, yes, it is true that some kinds of video game packaging are on the decline; but in the end, this slow disappearance is no doubt necessary for nostalgia to arise, just as rarity is needed for valuations to rise. But it also means that the nature of nostalgia itself is changing, as each new generation has different experiences that are equally certain to change as time passes. But hopefully, the experience of nostalgia will be something that we will always have with us, no matter how much the subject of that nostalgia changes.

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GRAND THEFT AUTO V (Rockstar Games 2013, O: Rockstar North)

NO MAN'S SKY (Hello Games 2016, O: Hello Games)

OBDUCTION (Cyan Worlds 2016, O: Cyan Worlds)

RESIDENT EVIL 7: BIOHAZARD COLLECTOR'S EDITION (Capcom 2016, O: Capcom)

SECRET WEAPONS OF THE LUFTWAFFE (Lucasfilm Games 1991, O: Lucasfilm Games)

SPIDER-MAN (Parker Brothers 1982, O: Laura Nikolich)

STADIUM EVENTS (Bandai 1987, O: Human Entertainment)

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