

## **Straits Times Life! 2007**

### **The King of Donkey Kong**

*By Neil Humphreys*

WHEN you are single, you learn to compensate by being really good at Donkey Kong. During my puberty years, which I like to call the mentally-scarring years, girlfriends were hard to come by so I learned to play with myself.

I can't begin to recall the hours spent clutching my joystick in the 1980s. I had a closer relationship with Donkey Kong, Pacman and space-invading Galaxians than I did with my own family. The only female I had an intimate relationship with was Miss Pacman.

From the moment I opened my 1983 Christmas present of my first home computer (a Sinclair Spectrum 48k, which was the poor man's Commodore 64), I hung out with my new friends until Kelly Stewart finally granted me permission to kiss her after school as long as I brought along my better-looking friend Larry.

No such love triangles with Miss Pacman. The little man-eater belonged only to me, although my mother never really approved of her influence.

"What are you doing in your bedroom?" Her voice frequently bellowed from the living room.

"I'm playing Miss Pacman."

"Who's she? You dirty little bastard."

"It's a computer game."

"I don't care what it is. It's not healthy spending all that time in your bedroom playing with yourself. It'll ruin your eyesight."

As I can no longer read this column without glasses, I'll concede my perceptive mother was right on the money there.

But the Pacman family, the barrel-throwing Donkey Kong and the army of Space Invaders were good company during the girlfriend-less years.

On Saturday, I was reacquainted with my old pals at the video arcade exhibition at the Australian Centre for the Moving Image. Called Game On, the exhibition charted the fascinating history of gaming, from the first arcade game Pong (that Atari beep-boop tennis game where you hit the ball with a white stick) right up to the current trend of inter-linked online gaming where you sit at a laptop in St Kilda and batter a fellow geek in Seattle.

The exhibition was filled with classic arcade games and a disturbingly high number of long-haired men wearing back t-shirts depicting either Star Wars, The Simpsons or ... insert your own sci-fi movie or cult animated TV show here.

The exhibition was undoubtedly geeky and some of its ticket-holders needed to be introduced to a razor and deodorant (and perhaps even some women), but it was also one of the most wonderfully nostalgic days of my life.

I stood before an original Space Invaders game being projected on a gargantuan screen and practically bowed down at the altar of its control panel.

As I queued to play a vintage Atari Star Wars game (find one in pristine condition and it'll cost you more than a brand new Holden), I began chatting with another nostalgic guy also in his mid-30s but with a couple of kids in tow to drastically lower the geek factor.

We were young, grumpy old men together.

"They had real computer games in our day, don't you think?" I asked, while we contemplated removing the cherubic boy playing his third consecutive Star Wars game by ripping off his joystick-holding hands.

"Oh, definitely," the father-of-two replied. "The game play was better. That's why I've brought my two boys along to appreciate it."

His boys took a quick peak at Star Wars' simplistic, 1983 line graphics, issued a hollow laugh and trotted off to play that daft dancing game where competitors look they're in need of a padded cell.

As I lamented the cynicism of the X-Box generation, cherubic boy finished his third Star Wars game and father-of-two ducked inside to grab the still-warm seat. I didn't like him anymore.

I was joined in the queue by two teenagers who were wearing a distinct men's cologne. I think it's called, "I Haven't Washed Since Puberty".

Their attempts to downplay our geeky environment with a dollop of misplaced masculinity were almost too much to bear.

"This Star Wars Atari game is cool," said teen in Led Zeppelin t-shirt. "I've played some of these bad boys before."

"Totally," replied teen in Homer Simpson t-shirt. "I just played the original Super Mario. That was one serious bad boy."

I was down among the serious bad boys again and loving it. I hadn't felt this cool since I learnt all the words to MC Hammer's U Can't Touch This.

At that moment, father-of-two invited me into the cockpit to blow up the Death Star. I smiled, and stepped back into my childhood.