

CBS ColecoVision

An arcade-style games console fondly **immortalised by South Park** and saved by Donkey Kong.

In a recent episode of the cartoon *South Park*, Kyle, Stan and Cartman stay with their poor friend Kenny. Much to their dismay, Kenny's dad mentions they couldn't afford Nintendo, but they do have a ColecoVision...

How times change. Only, er, 17 years ago, the ColecoVision was heralded as the world's first 'third-generation' games console, promising 'arcade-quality' games. This was 1982, with the Atari VCS (*PCW*, *Retro*, September), already four years old, but as yet untoppled from its throne. However, Coleco had a cunning plan...

Looking back to the mid-1970s, the surprisingly named CONnecticut LEather COmpany produced the TelStar Arcade home games console. It did reasonable business until upstarts such as Atari came along with removable cartridges and multiple variations, killing the market for simple Pong tennis games. Coleco backed off and prepared for battle.

With Atari buying licences for huge arcade hits such as *Space Invaders* and *Asteroids*, Coleco had to take on something equally big to launch its console. It found its killer application in Nintendo's *Donkey Kong*, arguably the world's first platform game. Legend has it the name was derived by the Japanese from a giant gorilla who had kidnapped a girl and was as stubborn as a mule or, erm, a donkey. Unbeknown to *Donkey Kong*, it had kidnapped the girlfriend of none other than the Italian plumber Mario, himself destined to star in one or two minor hits.

Equally unbeknown to Coleco (which had just beaten Atari and Mattel to the home licence of *Donkey Kong* in late 1981), was Universal Studios' impending legal action against Nintendo (and now

also Coleco) over infringement of the King Kong copyright. Coleco allegedly settled out of court for three per cent of all royalties from the game, although Nintendo fought it and won. Coleco apparently also then filed a suit, reclaiming some lost royalties.

It wasn't to matter. Within six months of



release, the ColecoVision console shot to number one, thanks to the bundle of *Donkey Kong* as standard for a fraction under £150. The bulk of its other games were near or perfect conversions of (mostly obscure) arcade games. *Zaxxon* stunned the world with 3D scrolling, while *Smurf* was no different from watching a genuine cartoon!

These were the good times. ColecoVision's industry-leading hardware was based around an 8bit Z-80A processor running at 3.58MHz, backed up by 8KB of RAM. More crucially, the Texas Instruments (TI) TMS9928A graphics processor could drive a TV at an impressively high 256 x 192 pixel resolution and support a massive 32 sprites in 16 colours. Superior sound came from the TI SN76489AN, boasting three channels. Games cartridges came in 8-32KB sizes.

The case was long and sleek and, like Mattel's IntelliVision, featured recessed

housing for its two games controllers. And what controllers these were! Each featured not one, but two side-mounted buttons and a 12-key numeric keypad accompanying the somewhat strange stubby joystick. There were optional trackball-roller controllers, too.

These, however, were peanuts

compared to the optional Super Action Controller, a pistol-style grip with four coloured trigger buttons and a superb arcade-style stick.

The real key to ColecoVision's success was its unique expandability. Three expansion units eventually arrived: the first litigiously offering compatibility with Atari VCS carts, the second boasting

a steering wheel and pedals, and the third in the form of the legendary Adam computer. The Adam expanded RAM to 64KB, came with a keyboard, a pair of 256KB cassette tape drives and a huge daisy wheel printer.

Unfortunately the Adam was pricey and

delayed, and by the time it arrived, the great 1984 console depression had sealed Coleco's fate. Not even a *Cabbage Patch Dolls* licence or the promised CED vinyl video record adaptor with a perfect clone of *Don Bluth's Dragon's Lair* could save it. Coleco may have stopped producing its console in 1984, but in the space of two years it had shifted no fewer than six million of them. It lives on in this writer's memory, those of *South Park* and, of course, in emulators on the web.

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If you want to get hold of a ColecoVision or any other retro console, ring the Retro Computer Exchange on 0171 692 1213.
www.classicgaming.com/vcoeco/



◀ **DONKEY KONG WAS BUNDLED WITH THE COLECOVISION CONSOLE AND HELPED PUSH IT TO NUMBER ONE WITHIN SIX MONTHS OF RELEASE**

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