

our town

Game Boy

What Sean Kelly did when his video game collection got too big for the garage.

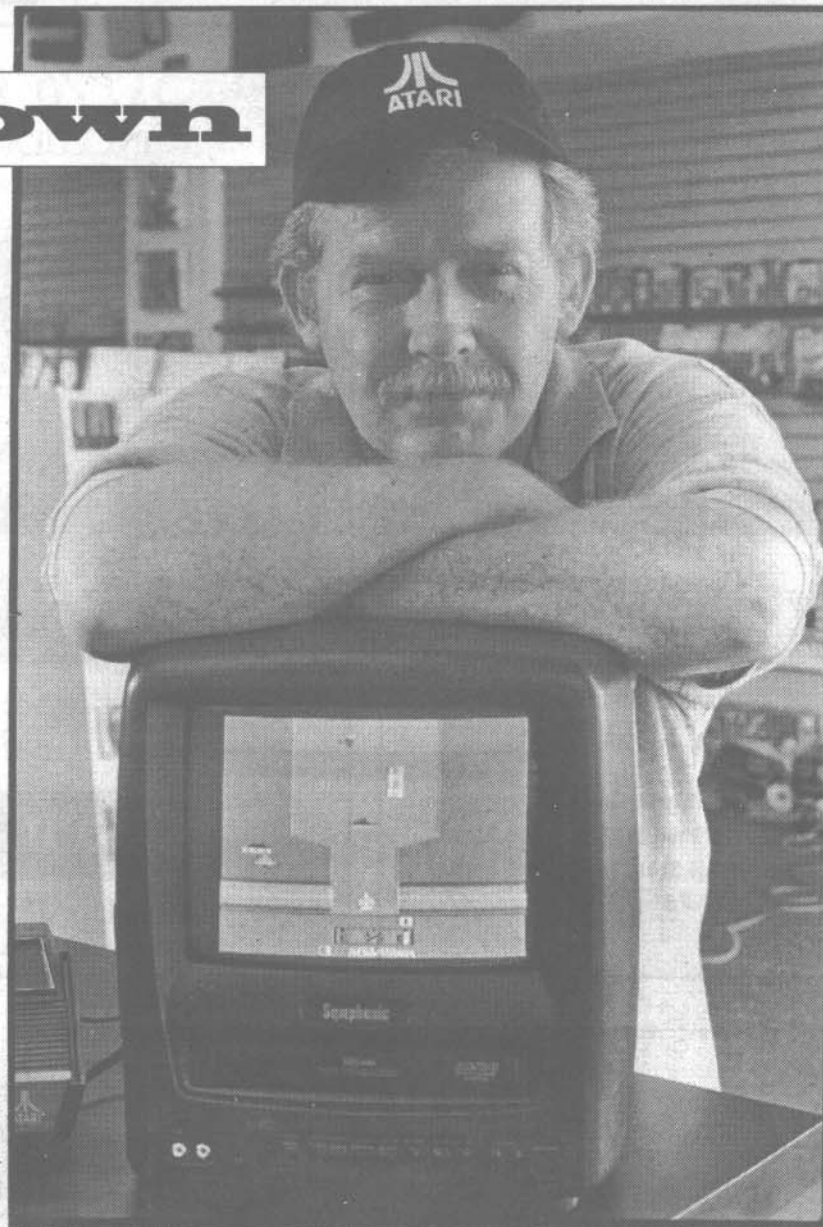
BY JEFFREY FELSHMAN

When Sean Kelly opened his new store, Videogames Etc., this past June he kept the fanfare to a minimum. "Video game collectors can be a pretty critical lot, so I avoided doing the grand opening thing," he says. "I just wanted to get it up and quietly running, then give myself some time to get the details right."

Kelly could be confident that word would get around about the store, given his prominence in the field of vintage video consoles and cartridges. He started his collection way ahead of the pack, in 1986, and went on to become a senior editor of *Digital Press Collector's Guide*, the blue book of the market. He helped found the Classic Gaming Expo, a collectors' convention held annually in Las Vegas since 1997, and has been profiled at length in *Wired* magazine and interviewed on CNN and, more prestigiously, on G4, the 24-hour cable channel devoted exclusively to video games. Presently he's at work on a book about the rise and fall of the Atari empire.

Given the pioneering part he's played in developing the collectors' market for old games, it seems surprising that it's taken the 36-year-old Norridge resident so long to turn his passion into a business. "I've thought

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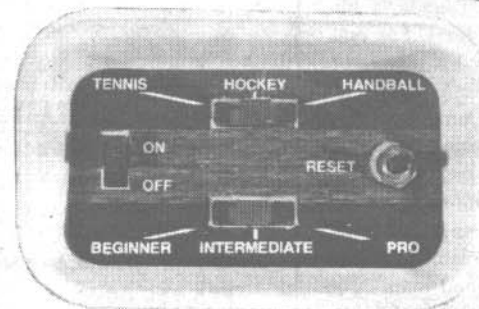


about that many times since I opened this place," says Kelly. "I guess it was fear. The only thing I ever knew since I was 14 years old was the White Hen Pantry. I have four kids and a wife. I was always afraid to change anything."

Until he sold his franchise last January, Kelly was well on his way to becoming a lifer with White Hen. He started working there at 14 after lying about his age on the application. It seemed to Kelly that his boss there had

a pretty good life, so at 15 he applied for a franchise of his own, only to be told that 21 was the minimum age. Kelly continued to clerk at White Hen until he turned 18, when, with a bank loan and some help from his dad, he opened a Subway at Harlem and Devor, close to the family home. He didn't turn a profit until he sold the store two years later.

White Hen kept his application on file and called Kelly just before his 21st birthday to see if he was still interested. In 1989 he opened his own store at



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Milwaukee and Austin. He liked the business well enough until the chain was acquired in 2000 by Clark Retail Services, a gas station management firm that steered White Hen away from its traditional grocery lines to focus on snacks and sodas. "You don't make any money on that stuff," Kelly says. "They turned us into a giant gas station with no gas." Nine months ago Kelly sold his franchise and stock back to the company and walked away.

It didn't take Kelly long to figure out what to do next. "My entire garage and half my basement was full of games," he says. "What should I do? Hmmmm." After four weeks of scouting he found a promising retail space at 4351 N. Harlem in Norridge.

A chronological display of gaming systems fills the length of a 90-foot wall at Videogames Etc. The timeline begins near the entrance with a 1976 Coleco Telstar Pong machine and ends with a state-of-the-art Gameboy Advance SP. At the halfway mark, perched between a 1982 Atari 5200 and a 1985 Nintendo NES, sits a plastic tombstone that reads: "Video Game Industry 1976-1984." The terminal date refers to a sudden, massive market collapse that killed off many first-generation brand names. "About

the middle of 1984 all the companies producing systems were losing millions and millions of dollars," says Kelly. "A lot of the companies that were producing software went bankrupt." The slump has usually been attributed to a flood of inferior products. "People saw there was money to be made and started up their own companies, but they had no feel for games and wrote really bad software." And even established firms like Atari had gotten complacent. "A lot of people point to 'E.T.' for the Atari 2600 as the game that killed the video game market," Kelly says. One of the most anticipated releases of the year, the game, which had something to do with a quest to find parts for a broken phone so E.T. could call home, was universally condemned as an incoherent mess: "The rumor is that they took a million 'E.T.' cartridges and buried 'em in the New Mexico desert."

Kelly made his own small contribution to the market collapse of '84. He was 13 when his father brought home an Intellivision system in 1980, and for the next two years he devoted all his free time to playing games like "Astrosmash," "Sea Battle," and "Major League Baseball." Then, like many other first-generation video game players, he put away childish things. "I was 15, 16, and I decided it

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was more fun to chase after the girls, so the games didn't get much use for a while," he says.

In 1983 Kelly sold his console and his library of 50 games. He bought an Atari computer around the same time but rarely used it. "But when I finally landed a girl I decided I was going to get my Intellivision stuff back," he says.

Kelly married his wife Melissa in 1989, by which time he was hitting flea markets, yard sales, and thrift shops "literally every Sunday" in search of the lost games of his youth. "You could get the games for two bucks each," he says. "You could get a big box with a system and games in it for 20 bucks. Everybody was just dumping it." Today a rare title like CommaVid's "Video Life" can fetch as much as \$3,000.

His Sunday rounds brought Kelly into contact with like-minded guys who were collecting games for other systems. "I found a lot of times I didn't have anything to trade with these people," he says. "So I started picking up Atari games. And it just kind of snowballed from there." At some point Kelly crossed the line that separates the acquisitive player from the hard-core collector. Eventually he was picking up games and systems of all kinds.

By the early 90s video game collec-
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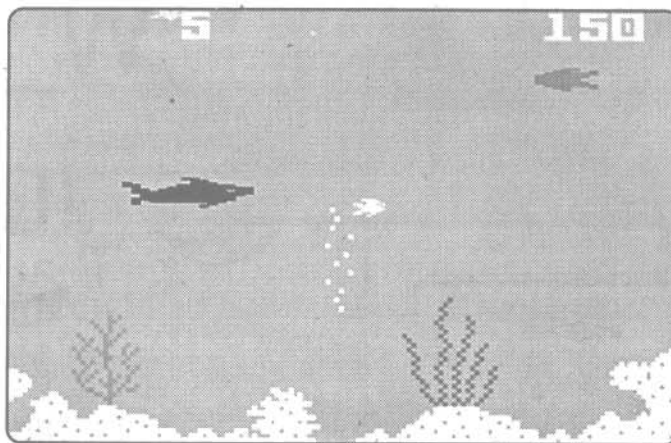
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tors were beginning to coalesce into a subculture. "As the number of collectors started to increase I found that it was a good idea to sell off some of my games rather than trade them," says Kelly. He advertised his surplus cartridges and consoles on a bulletin board system he hosted on his computer and in *Digital Press*, which was then just a fanzine.

In 1992 it occurred to Kelly that some of the manufacturers making games and consoles at the time of the great crash of '84 might be sitting on old inventory. He placed an ad in *Nuts & Volts Magazine*, a periodical widely read throughout the electronics industry. A few months later he got a positive reply from a factory that used to subcontract for Intellivision. "I bought somewhere between a thousand and fifteen hundred games from them," says Kelly, who won't name the company because he doesn't want to

tip off competitors. In 1998 Kelly and his friend John Hardie duplicated that coup on a far larger scale, locating about 40,000 boxed and sealed classic games in a Texas warehouse. It took a semitrailer to haul them off. The score made Kelly's collection one of the largest in the world at the time: "I only knew of two people who had more games than me." But today, Kelly says, "there are people who know more about this stuff than I do, and a few have larger collections than me." Despite his deep vintage inventory, Kelly is selling new games alongside the old. "I need people to see that this place is not a museum," he says. "People don't go to museums to spend money."

At the front of the store are six

**Shark! Shark!**

gaming kiosks, arranged in a circle, where customers can try out new games on a Gamecube, an Xbox, or a PlayStation 2, and vintage games on an Atari 2600, a Colecovision, or an Intellivision. "It's funny to watch some of the kids play these games," says Kelly. "One of the favorites is Intellivision's 'Shark! Shark!' Kids'll be over all day

playing this game. There's never been anything like it, and it's simple." In "Shark! Shark!" the player is a tiny fish that grows bigger by eating smaller fish but must avoid being eaten by bigger fish, including the dreaded shark.

Overall, Kelly prefers the 2-D minimalism of vintage games and thinks that advancing technology has made game designers lazy. "In the old days the only thing that they could concentrate on was making the game fun," he says. "They're not going to be able to do Dolby Prologic, they're not going to be able to do DVD video, all they can figure out is how to make something fun." A lot of the new games, he adds, "are insulting to my in-

telligence," citing PlayStation 2's "Metal Gear Solid 2: Sons of Liberty" as an example. "When you first play that game you have to sit through 20 minutes of video. They won't let you use your imagination. Am I stupid? Do I have to be told everything about this game? Let me figure some of it out. I'm pounding on the controller: 'Can I play yet?'"

Still, Kelly admits to admiring PlayStation 2's "Medal of Honor," and during the 70 hours he puts in at the store on an average week he makes it a point to try out the latest releases.

During the summer Melissa, who hates video games as passionately as Kelly loves them, brought their four daughters to the store on a daily basis. Nine-month-old Claire and her five-year-old sister Kristin are a little young for gaming, but the two elder girls are into it, eight-year-old Emily more so than ten-year-old Amanda—though "nothing like a boy would be," says Kelly. "They're psycho." ■