



BEFORE THE CRASH

early video game history



EDITED BY MARK J.P. WOLF



© 2012 by Wayne State University Press, Detroit, Michigan 48201. All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced without formal permission. Manufactured in the United States of America.

16 15 14 13 12 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Before the crash : early video game history / edited by Mark J. P. Wolf.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-8143-3450-8 (pbk. : alk. paper) — ISBN 978-0-8143-3722-6
(ebook)

1. Video games—History. 2. Video games—Social aspects. I. Wolf, Mark
J. P.

GV1469.3B44 2012

794.8—dc23

2012001474



Typeset by Maya Rhodes

Composed in Warnock Pro and Meta

CONTENTS

Foreword by Ed Rotberg vii

Acknowledgments xi

Introduction 1

MARK J. P. WOLF

Video Games Caught Up in History: Accessibility, Teleological
Distortion, and Other Methodological Issues 9

CARL THERRIEN

What's Victoria Got To Do with It? Toward an Archaeology of
Domestic Video Gaming 30

ERKKI HUHTAMO

Ball-and-Paddle Consoles 53

LEONARD HERMAN

Channel F for Forgotten: The Fairchild Video Entertainment
System 60

ZACH WHALEN

The Video Game Industry Crash of 1977 81

MARK J. P. WOLF

A Question of Character: Transmediation, Abstraction, and
Identification in Early Games Licensed from Movies 90

JESSICA ALDRED

Every Which Way But . . . : Reading the Atari Catalog 105
SHEILA C. MURPHY

One-Bit Wonders: Video Game Sound before the Crash 119
KAREN COLLINS

The Rise and Fall of Cinematronics 138
TIM SKELLY

Color-Cycled Space Fumes in the Pixel Particle Shockwave:
The Technical Aesthetics of *Defender* and the Williams Arcade
Platform, 1980–82 168
BRETT CAMPER

Coin-Drop Capitalism: Economic Lessons from the Video Game
Arcade 189
CARLY A. KOCUREK

Early Online Gaming: BBSs and MUDs 209
STACI TUCKER

Appendix A: Video Game History: Getting Things Straight 225
RALPH H. BAER

*Appendix B: The Magnavox Co. v. Activision, Inc.: 1985 WL 9469
(N.D. Cal. 1985)* 234
ROSS A. DANNENBERG

Contributors 239

Index 245

to the ways in which users respond to media, redefine their uses, and contribute meanings that resonate within media culture at large. The public surface of game culture is produced by massive identity machineries operated by software and hardware manufacturers with the willing support of advertisers and popular media outlets. Gamers and enthusiasts add their share as well, circulating information, opinions, and rumors on countless online forums (including “independent” blog sites covertly funded by the media industry). A media archaeology of gaming penetrates beyond this uneven, reflective, and multipatterned surface, looking for symptoms of neglected and suppressed developments behind it. While illuminating the past, media-archaeological excavations also help us question the received truths of contemporary culture.

BACK TO THE FUTURE, OR PRE-POSITIONING THE VIDEO GAME CONSOLE

In 1978, Magnavox, the American television manufacturer that had reinvented itself as a pioneer of domestic video gaming, released *Odyssey*², another descendent of its legendary flagship product, the *Odyssey* (1972). A magazine advertisement promoting the *Odyssey*², shows a grinning father and smiling daughter staring intensely at each other, clutching joysticks between their fingers (Fig. 2.1).⁶ Both are shown in profile, the console and TV-screen game display between them, facing the reader—we are obviously invited to place ourselves within the picture via identification. The projectile shot by the father’s avatar is bouncing from a tree—a *miss!*—whereas the daughter’s avatar is about to make a direct hit at the “father figure”—*bang!* The ad presents *Odyssey*² as a way of bonding—family members, sexes, and generations—but in a playfully subversive and mischievous way. Reversing prevailing social norms, the daughter may humiliate her father without being punished, as long as it happens within the virtual world of the game.

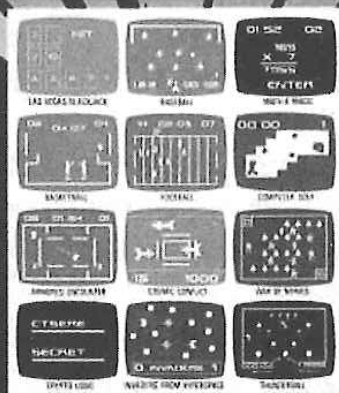
The text presents the console as the “ultimate gift” (probably from the father to the family). The slogan at the bottom sums up Magnavox’s mission: “We make staying home fun.” For the media archaeologist, this is not the whole story or even the full sentence. Its unstated cultural subtext could be formulated as follows: “so that children will never leave their parents, and will stay away from bars, game arcades, and other bad influences.” Underlying the slogan is the implicit suggestion that without the system, staying at home is *not* fun. The “transgression” of social norms the ad hints at serves this purpose: the *Odyssey*², connected with the domestic television set, provides the daughter a harmless way of releasing whatever pressures



**GIVE THE ULTIMATE
COMPUTER VIDEO GAME.**

**The program-
mable computer
video game sys-
tem.** Odyssey² has
a sophisticated 49
character alpha-
numeric keyboard.

**Over 30 games
to play.** Odyssey²
offers a wide variety
of arcade, sports and
educational games.



**3-game car-
tridge and hand
controls included.**

Odyssey² gives you
more than other video
games. Odyssey².
The ultimate game.
The ultimate gift. From
the originator...
Magnavox.

**Dial 800-447-
4700 toll free for
store nearest you.**

© 1979 MAGNAVOX CONSUMER ELECTRONICS CO.

MAGNAVOX
MAGNAVOX
MAGNAVOX
MAGNAVOX
MAGNAVOX

WE MAKE STAYING HOME FUN.

Fig. 2.2. Magnavox Odyssey² advertisement. From www.retroist.com/2009/04/15/magnavox-odyssey-2-ad-from-1980.



"Finally, a book of scholarship on video games that acknowledges that they were made before *World of Warcraft*, *The Sims*, and *Tomb Raider*! This book offers insight into the design and technical history of games and systems you should be embarrassed not to know more about."



—IAN BOGOST, professor of digital media at Georgia Institute of Technology and co-author of *Racing the Beam: The Atari Video Computer System*



"One of our preeminent video game scholars, Wolf continues to break new ground with this fascinating collection."

—JAMES CASTONGUAY, associate professor of communication and media studies at Sacred Heart University



"In this smart volume on the early history of video games, the authors admit to their feelings of nostalgia, while bringing us new insights about old games and game hardware."

—JESPER JUUL, assistant professor at New York University Game Center and author of *Half-Real*

"*Before the Crash* is fascinating reading and provides valuable service to the entire game studies field by presenting detailed analyses of early video game culture. Covering the production, economics, and gameplay of video games produced in the 1970s and early 1980s, this book proves the value of historical perspective for understanding the basis of the present digital lifestyle. As leading academics in game history and professionals who themselves participated in the creation of the games industry, the contributors bring together an impressive body of expertise from this important field."

—FRANS MÄYRÄ, professor of digital culture and game studies at University of Tampere

MARK J.P. WOLF is a professor in the communication department at Concordia University Wisconsin. His books include *Abstracting Reality: Art, Communication, and Cognition in the Digital Age*; *The Medium of the Video Game*; *Virtual Morality: Morals, Ethics, and New Media*; *The Video Game Theory Reader*; *Myst and Riven: The World of the D'ni*; *The Video Game Explosion: A History from PONG to PlayStation and Beyond*; *The Video Game Theory Reader 2*; and the two-volume *Encyclopedia of Video Games*. He is also founder of the Landmark Video Game book series and the Video Game Studies Scholarly Interest Group within the Society of Cinema and Media Studies.

Contributors: Jessica Aldred, Ralph H. Baer, Brett Camper, Karen Collins, Ross A. Dannenberg, Leonard Herman, Erkki Huhtamo, Carly A. Kocurek, Sheila C. Murphy, Ed Rotberg, Tim Skelly, Carl Therrien, Staci Tucker, Zach Whalen, Mark J. P. Wolf

Contemporary Approaches to Film
and Media Series

Cover design by Rebecca Lown

Wayne State University Press
Detroit, Michigan 48201-1309

ISBN-13: 978-0-8143-3450-8



9 780814 334508