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# A Primer of Video and Pinball Game History

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## **A Primer of Video and Pinball Game History**

Pinball games have been a part of American culture since 1931, when the *Baffle Ball* pinball game was introduced during the Great Depression. Video games such as *Pong*, *Space Invaders*, *Donkey Kong*, and *Pac-Man* emerged in arcades and homes during the late 1970s and early 1980s, and their popularity continues today, in the more complex forms of systems like Wii and games like the *Guitar Hero* series. The story of video and pinball games is far reaching, so this history focuses on Internet resources documenting coin-operated (“coin-op”) arcade and pinball games and home video game systems, while also discussing efforts aimed at preserving the gaming legacy.

### **Introduction to Gaming History**

A good Web-based introduction to gaming history is the companion Web site for the 2004 PBS documentary *The Video Game Revolution*, <http://www.pbs.org/kcts/videogamerevolution/>. This resource contains an interactive timeline of the evolution of home and coin-op arcade games, a look into how games are created, interviews with game designers, and a variety of downloads and trivia quizzes. My favorite section lists “cheats” for several Atari 2600 games, including classics such as *Combat*, *Decathlon*, and *Raiders of the Lost Ark*.

### **Pinball and Coin-Op Games**

Interested in learning more about that *Amazing Spider-Man* pinball machine that your uncle had in his basement in the 1980s or the *Star Wars* coin-op you pumped quarters into at the video arcade with your pals when you were a kid? Two excellent Internet resources for researching arcade games are the *Internet Pinball Machine Database*, <http://www.ipdb.org/>, and *Arcade History*, <http://www.arcade-history.com/>, which both contain searchable on-line databases. By conducting a keyword search of the title of the pinball machine or coin-op game, or by running an advanced search to retrieve more precise results, one can discover an abundance of information about a game, including the creator, manufacturer, and number of units produced. Searches on these sites also retrieve images of the coin-op or pinball machine itself, including the playing field and side art, tips and tricks for achieving higher scores, and information about home video versions of some games.

There are also Web sites dedicated to specific genres of arcade games, such as laser disc games. Remember *Dragon's Lair*? Released in 1983, *Dragon's Lair* was unlike anything that had ever previously appeared in an arcade. The *Dragon's Lair Project*, <http://www.dragons-lair-project.com>, not only documents this game, but also other laser disc games such as *Fire Fox* and *Space Ace*. The site includes screen shots, art, audio, spin-off merchandise, and technical information about these games, along with storyboards for a possible *Dragon's Lair* movie.

## **Home Video Games**

The success of coin-op video and pinball games in arcades made the development of home video game systems inevitable. The first home video game system, Magnavox's Odyssey, appeared in 1972. Despite a television commercial featuring Frank Sinatra, the Odyssey home video game system was not very successful. However, the Atari Video Computer System (VCS), better known as the Atari 2600, emerged as an extremely popular system in the gaming community upon its release in 1977. Among the several excellent Web sites dedicated to Atari, AtariAge, <http://www.atariage.com>, stands out. It not only features the classic 2600, but its successors: the 5200, the 7800, the Lynx, and the Jaguar. I felt like a kid again while perusing the scanned packaging, cartridges, and instruction manuals. The Web site also includes links and tutorials for Atari emulators, the software that will run the classic games on contemporary computers or gaming consoles.

## **Copyright Controversy**

Because emulators allow users to play older video games on personal computers or other game consoles that they were never intended to run on, copyright is a hot topic in the gaming community. The Internet has not only made the exchange of scanned images and digitized music from classic games possible (as evidenced by the previously mentioned Web sites), but the distribution of emulators and emulated games also has become very easy. Proponents of emulators argue that the practice allows the widespread enjoyment and preservation of obscure games that are no longer readily available, but many video game companies, such as Nintendo (<http://www.nintendo.com/corp/legal.jsp>) are working to protect their intellectual property rights by actively discouraging the use of emulators or unauthorized versions of their games. The emulation issue is certainly

reminiscent of the copyright issues faced by archivists, most commonly during on-line digitization projects involving historical photographs and print records.

### **Gaming in Archives and Libraries**

Not surprisingly, numerous archives and libraries have noticed the cultural significance of pinball and video games, and several repositories are working to preserve this history and to continue the gaming legacy. In April 2007 the Center for American History at the University of Texas at Austin announced the creation of a video game archives, <http://www.cah.utexas.edu/projects/videogamearchive/>. According to the project Web site, the *Videogame Archive* will “gather and make available for research materials from all sectors of the industry, including developers, publishers, and artists.” In addition to the games, it will collect print and digital documents related to the creation, design, and marketing of video games and video game consoles.

Also in April 2007 an alumnus of Stanford University donated 25,000 video games to the school. The games, <http://www-sul.stanford.edu/depts/hasrg/histsci/videogameslist.html>, are from a wide variety of consoles, including Atari, Xbox, PlayStation, Nintendo, PC, and Mac. Within the MAC region, the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC) Library also maintains a gaming collection, <http://www.library.uiuc.edu/gaming/>. According to the Web site, the goals of the collection are to create an archive of “vintage and contemporary games,” as well as to collect “vintage and secondary and supplementary research materials to facilitate investigation of gaming.” The gaming collections at both Stanford University and UIUC are available for use by patrons, and help to ensure the continued popularity of gaming with American culture.