The Name of the Game Is Jocktronics: Sport and Masculinity in Early Video Games

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ALTHOUGH IT MAY NEVER BE SETTLED WHICH VIDEO GAME deserves to be called the first, it's notable that two games based on racquet sports always come up in talk of the medium's origins. *Tennis for Two,* a demonstration using an analog computer and an oscilloscope at Brookhaven National Laboratory (1958), and *Pong,* the first hit coin-operated game from Atari (1972), are in some ways quite similar.[1] Both are competitions between two players given the ability to direct the movement of a ball, which bounces back and forth between them. Both are examples of sports games, a genre that would prove to be among the most enduring, enjoyable, and lucrative in the history of electronic play. And both can be placed within a tradition of masculine amusements adapted from professional athletics, which had already been popular in American society in penny arcades and around gaming tables for more than a half century when electronic games were new. We can regard *Pong* not just as an early and influential video game, but as part of a history of sports simulations and adaptations and as an electronic version of tavern and rec room amusements such as pool and Ping-Pong, from which it gets its name.

According to some historical accounts, the triumph of the *Pong* prototype at Andy Capp's tavern in Sunnyvale, California, launched a new medium in popular culture, marking the emergence of a new format of electronic amusement and a break from the past.[2] By offering an interactive experience of play controlling a small square of light on a video screen, *Pong* and many similar games in public and in the home did come across as novel and exciting, so much so that according to legend, the

original game stopped working when it became overstuffed with coins. Games like *Pong* were a new use for the familiar cathode-ray tube TV set and a step forward in consumer electronics and high-tech leisure. To see *Pong* as a first, in retrospect, is to regard its difference from what came before it.

But the introduction of electronic games marked continuity as well as change. There is a tendency in popular media histories to see firsts as wholly original creative outbursts on the order of the Big Bang – at one moment there is nothing, and at the next we have the telephone or cinema or video games, as we would later understand these media. The reality is usually more messy and less teleological, as technologies and formats develop under the influence of available and familiar models. The fact that *Pong* was first offered to the public at a bar puts it into a context of coin-operated amusements such as jukeboxes, pinball games, and pool tables. As a racquet game it was instantly familiar, just as sports games based on baseball, football, horse racing, and boxing had been to thrill seekers at the penny arcade. In the same way that early cinema emerged out of nineteenth-century shows integrating imagery on screens, early video games drew upon forms of amusement and popular culture of their time.[3]

As video games emerged in the 1970s in the United States, many experiences of this new kind of electronic, mediated play involved some element of sports and relied on the player's familiarity with the most popular types of competitive play. Early games like *Pong* often had sporting themes. The first several years of home video game history are dominated by "ball-and-paddle" games, which expanded the basic racquet-sport concept to include versions of hockey, soccer, and handball and to add more sound and color.[4] The first home video game, the Magnavox Odyssey, included not only tennis but also hockey and football (as well as several other games). Other popular genres in these years included racing and shooting. With the introduction of programmable consoles such as Atari and Intellivision, which accepted game cartridges sold separately, many of the titles on offer were versions of professional team sports such as soccer, baseball, football, basketball, and hockey, and a number of auto racing games became popular. As competitive amusements calling on the skill and strategy of players using their bodies in

pursuit of high achievement, video games themselves were quite sport-like independent of their content and were often discussed as a form of competition not so different from barroom sports such as darts and billiards or country club sports such as tennis. This distinguished them as a more active and masculine use of video technology than watching television, which by contrast was represented as passive. In some ways, video games drew on a heterogeneous array of influences for their content, from pro sports to science fiction as well as pinball and other coin-operated amusements. But despite this heterogeneity, competitive sports were of central importance to the development of their identity.

The affinity between sport and video games can help us understand the development of the cultural status of the emerging medium. We can use this correspondence in putting together a picture of the developing place of video games in popular imagination.[5] Video games developed in these early years into a form of boy culture, drawing on a tradition of masculine play and leisure-time amusement. Despite a tendency to see a new medium as a rupture from the past, as a revolutionary technological advance, video games can also be regarded as a way of playing some of the same sports and games as had been played in American society for decades, mediated through new instruments. The centrality of sports to early video games was one of the reasons the new medium was understood to be active, competitive, and masculine.

In this chapter I will consider three ways in which video games came into this identity during their early years, roughly 1972–1982. First, taking the example of the Odyssey, a game console released in 1972, I place video games into a history of masculinized sports simulations, games played both in public and in private. Second, looking at 1970s popular press discourses, I identify a recurring theme in these discussions of sports games representing a redefinition of television as an active, participatory medium, marking its transition from passive commercial broadcasting to active competition. And third, I analyze two TV advertising campaigns of the late 1970s and early 1980s for Atari and Intellivision. In these commercials, sports games figure prominently and cement the appeal of the new medium as a way of simulating professional athletics. In all three examples, video games are understood as a way of combining traditions of masculine amusement with electronic media technology.

ODYSSEY BETWEEN OLD AND NEW SPORTS SIMULATIONS

The Magnavox Odyssey has a special place in video game history, functioning as another first – first game for use with a consumer's TV set – and also as a bridge between two kinds of play. Odyssey is the clearest example of the debt early games owe to the amusements of the pre–video game years. Odyssey came on the market in the same year as *Pong,* and the two have a common origin point in Ralph Baer's Brown Box, now in the collection of the Smithsonian. Baer created this TV game prototype for the electronics firm Sanders Associates in 1967 and 1968; Magnavox later acquired the rights to market the technology.[6] But before it was released it had been demonstrated publicly, and Nolan Bushnell and Al Alcorn created *Pong* in imitation of Baer's invention, which they had seen. Odyssey functions historically as a point of connection between two technological eras, incorporating elements of both board or cabinet games and video or electronic games. By contrast, *Pong* is self-contained as an electronic game.

Bushnell and Alcorn had previously failed to arouse significant interest in an earlier coin-op cabinet game called *Computer Space,* modeled after the mainframe game *Spacewar,* which Bushnell played as a student in Utah during the 1960s. *Computer Space* was thought to have failed because it was too challenging or confusing, and *Pong* was famously simple: its only instruction was "avoid missing ball for high score." By basing the game on the familiar concept of racquet sports, the player was oriented instantly and understood the objective and operations. Odyssey and *Pong* both worked in more or less the same way, giving the player operation of a paddle to use in directing the ball against an opponent's paddle. Unlike *Pong,* however, Odyssey came packaged with an array of other games. Odyssey *Tennis* was equivalent to *Pong* and required no elaborate instructions or paraphernalia. The rest of the games one could play on the Odyssey by inserting game cards into the console did require these accouterments, sometimes requiring elaborate ensembles of paper and plastic game components of the kind found in board game boxes.

In a number of ways, early video games picked up on traditions and ideals of play that already existed and were well established in the 1970s, particularly those associated with the suburban recreation room. Base-

ment sports such as Ping-Pong and pool and table games like cards and Monopoly were supposed to bring the middle-class family together in companionate leisure. Advertisements for early games including Odyssey and Atari often pictured family members together in the family or living room, united in electronic play, much as earlier ads for televisions and radios had pictured a family circle integrating all members of the household together in the pleasure of each other's company. Images of video games in department store catalogs of the 1970s placed the electronic amusements alongside other rec room products such as bumper pool and Ping-Pong tables. Sometimes the video games were pictured alongside other tabletop games like chess (or electronic chess). Imagery in magazines and catalogs pictured players in sociable settings, combining participants of mixed age or gender. Similar images were often seen in television commercials, including one Atari ad from the later 1970s in which a mother repeatedly rejects inquiries from babysitters, preferring to stay at home with her husband, son, and daughter playing video games.

At the same time as home play was represented integrating the family, throughout the postwar years some games popular for home play were addressed particularly to boys and men. These games often have professional sports themes. Numerous versions of baseball, football, basketball, horse racing, auto racing, boxing, and bowling were released in these years as board games. These might use the traditional board game materials of cards, dice, and tokens, but some were also similar to penny arcade cabinet games and integrated mechanical, electrical, and electronic components.[7] Penny arcade sports games go back at least to the 1880s, when automatic machines for shooting and horse racing were introduced. These games, like many similar coin-operated machines, proved popular with gamblers. Numerous penny- or nickel-in-the-slot sports games were fixtures in arcades beginning in the 1920s, when freestanding cabinet football games were particularly popular alongside boxing, racing, and other types of mechanical amusement.[8]

Compared with the physical skills demanded of penny arcade versions, some board games were considerably more cerebral and strategy oriented, such as APBA Baseball, a predecessor of Strat-o-Matic, Rotisserie, and fantasy sports leagues. APBA, first sold in 1951, claimed to be

"scientific" and employed real Major League player statistics to allow for simulated games, series, and even seasons.[9] But sports games for the home could also be physically oriented, such as those using balls, levers, figures, buttons, lights, and other moving objects. Jim Prentice Electric Baseball (1953) combined buttons and lights with tokens moved by the players around a metal baseball diamond board. Tru Action Electric Baseball Game (1958) employed a magnetic ball and a spring-loaded bat, and play involved aluminum ballplayer tokens. ABC Monday Night Football, a board game released in the same year as Odyssey, boasted "computerized" play and employed a combination of cards, buttons, lights, and a plastic green football "arena" field. The board in these games represented a field (or track), and the rules and processes of the real sport were reproduced and simulated using paper, plastic, and metal objects, sometimes including electrical components. Whether focused more on reproducing the physical performance or intellectual strategy of professional athletics, games based on sports offered players a simulation of the real thing and a taste of the thrill of high-level athletic competition.

The Odyssey is a device very clearly looking both back and forth in time, integrating elements of rec room games of the 1950s and '60s with those of an increasingly electronic age. The original Odyssey console released in 1972 was primitive by comparison even to later ball-and-paddle consoles, and Ralph Baer evidently thought that the way it straddled the board game and TV game forms was a failing.[10] Historically, however, this ambiguity in form demonstrates how video games drew upon a context of pre-electronic games in establishing their identity, and it reveals continuity as well as disruption in the history of leisure and amusement.

The electronic component of gameplay in Odyssey games was often rather slight, and the games required additional nonelectronic materials to be played at all. In most of the original Odyssey games, each of two players could control a square of light by moving it vertically and horizontally, and sometimes the player could put "English" on a ball that bounced between the rectangles, causing it to curve rather than travel straight. Odyssey had neither sound nor color. In some games, the image on screen could be made to move somewhat at random to come to a stop at a point on the display, an effect similar to spinning a wheel or rolling dice. To complete its representation of game spaces, the Odyssey

came packaged with translucent plastic overlay sheets that adhered to the glass of the CRT screen by its static electricity charge. Odyssey *Tennis* had a green court overlay, *Hockey* was a white rink, *Football* a green field, *Roulette* a red and black wheel, and so on. These overlays remediated the tabletop sports games like Electric Baseball, adapting them for play with a television set. Odyssey also came packaged with a variety of paraphernalia, including game chips, cards, dice, paper money, and game boards. In *Football,* the electronics functioned as one component of a wider ensemble of devices and materials, including a cardboard football field similar to the fields in sports-themed board games. *Football* players would sit across from each other with this field between them on the table. Playing Odyssey *Football* also required a paper scoreboard, a roll of frosted tape, a football token, a yardage marker, and six separate decks of cards for different kinds of plays, including passing, running, and kicking off. The manual spent six pages describing the process of gameplay, and players would have needed to keep it open while playing at least at first. Odyssey *Football* bears a strong resemblance to the football games for home play sold over several decades before electronic TV games came along.

As its game titles suggest, Odyssey, like many early consoles, was aimed at families. *Haunted House, Cat and Mouse,* and *Simon Says* are juvenile in their cartoonish representations and in their cultural associations. *States* and *Analogic* were meant to be educational. *Shooting Gallery,* a popular title using a rifle controller, was similar to the basement Daisy BB Gun ranges marketed to fathers and sons in 1960s issues of *Life.* Sports games might appeal to boys seeking indoor diversion on rainy days, perhaps in the company of parents, siblings, and friends. That most of these games were designed for two players rather than one indicates the sociable intentions of the producers and advertisers. Like later video game consoles and titles, the original Odyssey appealed to the suburban, middle-class family as a means of bringing them together. But in its continuation of traditions of masculine sports-themed play, Odyssey was also a way of further mediating and simulating the competitive amusements of boy culture, integrating the television set into the ensemble of technologies used for sporting leisure. From the start, home video games were helping children to fashion "virtual play spaces" where they would

continue the modes of gendered fantasy and interaction that date at least to the nineteenth century. For boy culture these would include competitive feats of physical achievement modeled on adult roles (professional athletics in this case) and performed for the recognition of peers.[11] In maintaining this tradition, Odyssey was not so different from the sports games that preceded and influenced it.

VIDEO GAMES, SPORTS, AND TELEVISION: MASCULINIZING A PASSIVE MEDIUM

Early video games had not yet established a well-defined identity as a medium, and efforts to understand them often struggled to relate video games to more familiar artifacts and experiences. New media frequently remediate old media, incorporating their contents and formats.[12] Video games built on older forms of play from arcades and family rooms; they also remediated television, their technological component most familiar to early users. Their very name incorporates the word *video,* often used as a synonym for television itself. Other names used in the 1970s included tele-games and TV games. The remediation of television by electronic games was understood not merely as a new use for the TV set, but as its transformation into something radically improved.

Early video games were often discussed, as new media technologies often are, in techno-utopian terms. They were thought to promise a solution to some of the problems with television. American television in the 1970s was occasionally admired for some of its evening programming such as the socially "relevant" hits *All in the Family* and *The Mary Tyler Moore Show,* aimed at elite audiences. The medium's reputation was nevertheless indisputably low. These were years when books appeared with titles such as *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television* and *The Plug-in Drug.* Following Federal Communications Commission chairman Newton Minow's "Vast Wasteland" speech in 1961, the cultural status of television was more that of a social problem than an art form. It was widely seen as a debased commercial mass medium devoted to profit and little else, a lowest-common-denominator "chewing gum for the eyes" to serve up audiences to advertisers, and a way for children, housewives, and shut-ins to pass their time. Rather than engaging au-

diences intellectually, in the manner of literature and other legitimate arts, television was believed to lull audiences into a kind of complacent, distracted passivity.[13]

In remediating television, early video games were often seen to be transforming and redeeming TV and marking its transition out of passivity and into activity. For many, this put video games in the same place culturally as other media innovations of the time, such as video art, cable television, and home videotape machines, all of which were seen to be making similar interventions into television as a mass medium.[14] Characterizing media technology and culture in these value-laden terms has strong undertones of gendered distinction, as the feminized passive medium was to be improved by being made more active, that is, by being masculinized.[15] The sports element of early games was central to this emerging discourse of video games improving TV by making it active. Sports was both literally the content of early games, but also a figure for understanding what the experience of games would be: rather than merely watching passively, the audience for TV would be transformed by games into athletes in active competition.

Frequently, when journalistic discussions tried to explain this new form of electronic amusement to readers, the sports themes of many early games helped make a distinction between television as a broadcasting medium and television as one component of the new games. In a *New York Times* story about the release of the Odyssey in May 1972, for example, the president of Magnavox (a longtime manufacturer of television sets) claims his company's product "is an educational and entertainment tool that transfers television from passive to an active medium." A *New York Times Magazine* feature two years later included quite similar language: "Odyssey costs $99.95 and is simple enough for the average consumer to attach to the back of his TV set, transforming the otherwise passive box in his living room into a game screen with two 'player' blips and a 'ball' blip moving across it." The article first describing TV games for readers of *Time* in 1972 paints the following contrast: "The average American spends six hours a day gazing passively at television. Soon he will have an opportunity to play a more active role in what appears on the screen of his set. Last week the Magnavox Co. demonstrated a device that will give set owners a chance to engage in electronic table

tennis, hockey, target shooting and other competitive games on their TV screens."[16] Although many of the Odyssey games included with the console had no sports theme at all – some were educational, such as *States,* and some were typical children's games, such as *Simon Says* – the emphasis here was on the most competitive and familiar sports games that might appeal to the male breadwinner making major purchases for the middle-class suburban family.

Publications aimed at male electronics hobbyists were especially invested in this kind of remediation of television. *Radio-Electronics* placed games into a standard before-and-after scenario, representing a transformation of television from meager entertainment to a more elaborate fantasy world of immersive sporting simulation: "For a considerable number of years, we sat in front of our TV sets and let them entertain us with moving pictures on that little screen. . . . Yet there is a new kind of entertainment on that home TV screen – it's a Ping-Pong game, a soccer field, a shooting gallery and others and you, who until now have been a passive viewer get to control the action."[17]

In all of these accounts of the new technology, we find not merely that the television is used in a new way, but that the user's experience is understood to have a value diametrically opposed to the typical television audience's. Another hobbyist publication, *Mechanix Illustrated,* captures this totally different idea of the television audience, a fresh identity in contrast to the lazy spectator of the past: "TV screens used to be just for watching whatever the network or the local station felt like putting on the air. Now the home set has become the center of family sportsmanship. . . . It appears that the bouncing blip could change the habits of American TV gluttons. It will surely get them more involved."[18] By expressing or implying a contempt for television's passive, implicitly feminized audience, these discourses articulate video games with a number of related conceptual terms, from the more specific, such as sports and competitive games, to the more abstract, such as active, engaged, involved. The viewer is in control.

A 1976 trend piece on the video games craze in *Time* drew upon a familiar trope of writing about video games at this time, treating the new medium not so much as its own thing and more as a thing to do with a TV set. The headline is "TV's New Superhit: Jocktronics." The idea that a

video game is a hit TV show confuses games, which you play, with shows, which you watch. And by calling this TV program "Jocktronics," the article makes clear that sports would be central to the remediation of television by gaming. The article offers this description of video game play: "Television's new superhit is Yourself, the Athlete (or Racing Driver, or Op Artist, or Blackjack High Roller). The name of the game – which is provided by a wide and wildly competitive assortment of electronic contests that can be simply hooked into any TV set – is Jocktronics."[19] By becoming the protagonist of the program, the viewer becomes an active agent, racing down a track or calling "Hit" at the card table. Television, so long understood to be a source of inane entertainment and diversion, was newly able to include the viewer not as a recipient of programming but as a part of the action. In presenting the confusion between sports play and television spectatorship, writers and illustrators would call upon familiar logics of television as passive and sports as active, suggesting that making TV a technology for play means renewal through greater activity. Jocktronics in particular masculinizes television, as the image of the jock is ever an essentially male one. But more generally by rejecting passivity, the discourse of video games as a form of sporting competition on television worked to distance the older medium from its traditional identity.

An especially important term in these discussions is *participation,* understood as a virtue then and now. We might think today that these ideas about media and play call to mind interactive media, but that term was not used to describe video games in the 1970s, and it would be anachronistic to apply that concept here; *interactive* in this usage comes from the field of computers, which entered Americans' everyday lives – at least as users – several years later than video games. *To interact* means that the machine communicates with you by giving output in instant response to your input, but *to participate* puts all of the agency onto the human user, whose involvement is a notable, fresh contrast against a previous lack of action. To call video games participatory and to say that their players were participants through technology associated the games with other practices and discourses of the 1970s, such as the craze for two-way CB radio and the rising popularity of physical fitness leisure such as jogging. To participate is to be involved and to contribute, rather than merely to

receive. One of the main criticisms of television broadcasting was that it had been a one-way medium, and efforts to transform it typically involved ideas that would point toward audiences giving feedback rather than merely receiving a signal.[20] When an article in *Sales and Marketing Management* in 1976 promised, "With the video games, it's strictly a participation sport," it was tapping into a wider discourse of media technology, in which participation was a value deemed to be missing from the institutions and practices of mass culture. Atari's Nolan Bushnell told a magazine interviewer in 1974 that he wanted to make amusements be "not just spectator-oriented but participatory." Reporting on the popularity of electronic games as Christmas presents in 1975, the *New York Times* quoted a retail analyst asserting, "We may be leaving the spectator era for the participation era."[21] The analyst quoted in the *Times* claimed that thanks to participation replacing spectatorship, that year he was even planning to skip watching the Super Bowl!

The popular press can be breathless in its techno-utopianism, but it often also signals uncertainty and anxiety about new technology. Sometimes, popular press representations referenced a sense of confusion around the status of the new games. Were they really active forms of play like sports or passive forms of mass culture like TV? A *Newsweek* story on video games published in 1972 begins with a description meant to trigger this category confusion and probe the status of this new use for TV technology: "'Let's play football,' one kid suggests. 'Tennis!' insists the other. They compromise on hockey. But instead of gearing up and heading for the front door, they troop into the living room and flip on the television set." This description is meant to defamiliarize sports and put the new games into a recognizable scenario, but it is also a bit unsettling in its replacement of indoors for outdoors and electronics gear for fields and courts. In a similar vein, a cartoon by Ed Arno illustrating a 1978 article on video games in *Changing Times,* a mass circulation magazine, pokes fun at the idea of these games as a more active use of the TV set. Seven years into the history of home video games, perhaps the idea of transformation had become familiar. Arno pictures an adult couple dressed for tennis, wearing visors on their heads and with racquets by their sides, sitting on a sofa in front of a TV set playing *Pong.* The mismatch between their sports apparel and equipment and their activity speaks to the sta-

tus of video games as a technology caught between authentic athletic competition and simulating sports through electronics.[22] Despite efforts to paint video games as participatory and active, their association with television would continue to influence their cultural status. But sports were central to their emerging identity, and the positive values often associated with video games in their early years were a product of the high regard for active participation and the usefulness of sports as an example of highly valued recreation.

INTELLIVISION, ATARI, AND BOY CULTURE FANTASY

By the beginning of the 1980s, video games had become familiar objects in public places, not just arcades but also bars, truck stops, bus depots, and any place where coin-operated amusements might be found. They were also a booming home entertainment business. Atari was acquired by Warner Communications in 1976 and quickly began to spend huge sums on advertising and promotion, particularly television commercials. Atari was the leader by far in this field, spending $18 million in 1981 to its nearest competitor's $5.5 million.[23] That competitor, the toymaker Mattel, had significant success in the later 1970s with its handheld electronic Football game, with its long rectangular field, red LEDs, and plastic buttons. This was at the same time that handheld electronics, from games such as Simon and Computer Perfection to educational toys such as Speak & Spell, were selling so briskly their manufacturers could not keep up with microchip supplies.[24] Mattel entered the programmable game market in 1979 and positioned itself as the most threatening rival to Atari in a lively field. While many other companies, including RCA, Fairchild, Bally, Magnavox, and Coleco, got into the programmable video game console business, it was two rival products, Atari's Video Computer System (later called 2600) and Mattel's Intellivision, that had the highest profile and most often represented home video games in popular imagination. The identities of both consoles were very much shaped by their use for playing sports games. Atari's controls and graphics were simple and even primitive by comparison to Intellivision's, which had not only a directional control but also a number pad and buttons on the sides. Atari had certain advantages, though: it boasted more titles (a selling point

in ads), more hit arcade game ports (*Space Invaders, Asteroids, Missile Command, Pac-Man*), and a stronger video game brand identity. Intellivision's advertisements prompted comparisons to Atari, while Atari's power position meant they might ignore the competition.

These two consoles were fairly typical of the period in terms of their sports games offerings. The first programmable console for purchase in American retail stores was Fairchild's Channel F, which appeared in 1976 with *Hockey* and *Tennis* built in. Other games available for Channel F as cartridges included *Shooting Gallery, Drag Strip, Baseball, Bowling,* and *Pro Football.* Consoles of similar vintage had similar titles. Baseball video games, to choose one popular sport, could be played on numerous programmable consoles of the 1970s and '80s, including the A P F M P1000, Arcadia 2001, Bally Astrocade, Odyssey, and RCA Studio II, in addition to Atari and Intellivision.[25] Atari's baseball game *Home Run* was released earlier, in 1978, and Intellivision appealed on the basis of its *Major League Baseball,* released in 1980, boasting superior graphics and gameplay. Atari's game allowed for a variety of pitches, including fastballs, curveballs, screwballs, and changeups, but players often found many other aspects of the game wanting, particularly the defensive aspects of the game and the absence of certain key elements of play such as fly balls and throwing runners out at a base. Intellivision's baseball game improved on this by including base stealing and bunting, among other details. Using synthesized speech, an umpire's voice would be heard calling players out. More than a million cartridges sold, making *Major League Baseball* Mattel's top seller.

As in this comparison between two baseball simulations, one of the criteria for evaluating and appreciating sports video games in these formative years was their ability to represent the details of a professional spectator sport and to render the experience with a sense of realism. The rhetoric of authenticity is everywhere in discussions of these sports games, positioning the new medium as a mimetic technology for the faithful reproduction of experience electronically. One way in which Intellivision sought an edge in this regard was by licensing the identities of the major league sports organizations, so that in comparison to cartridges merely called *Golf* or *Football,* Mattel offered official-sounding versions complete with familiar logos on the cartridge and in catalog art.

Atari's sports games included *Basketball, Bowling, Boxing, Championship Soccer, Football, Golf, Ice Hockey, Racquetball,* and *Tennis.* Intellivision's were *Major League Baseball, NFL Football, NHL Hockey, NBA Basketball, NASL Soccer, PBA Bowling, PGA Golf, U.S. Ski Team Skiing,* as well as variations on these such as *World Series Major League Baseball* and *World Cup Soccer.* Intellivision's appeal was as the version closer than rival products to the game as played professionally. Both companies, however, were eager to associate their games with the highest levels of competition.

Atari's print and TV campaigns in the later 1970s had a number of related agendas. Some TV spots and display ads marketed the game console, while others hawked the game titles for sale separately. One particularly relevant campaign for this discussion had the tagline "Don't watch television tonight. Play it!" In both magazine and television advertisements, this promotion aligned the transformation of electronic media from passive to active with another change, from watching television to playing sports on television. This drew upon the rhetoric of participation familiar from the initial considerations of video games as a brand-new technology.

In the Atari TV spots, video games would invite players to act out fantasies of masculine empowerment as they compete at virtual sports against the most famous seasoned professionals they have watched on television. In appealing to children, these scenarios sold a pair of competitive, if comical, fantasies: playing in the big leagues and besting your heroes. "Don't watch television tonight" functioned as an entreaty to the masculine sports fan to enter the era of participation through electronic play, while leaving behind the debased mass culture of broadcast TV.

Commercials for this TV campaign featured the most famous male athletes whose skills on the field would comically fail to translate into video games. Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, star center of the Los Angeles Lakers, stands facing the camera under a basketball net, hands raised in defense. He says incredulously, "You gonna slam dunk me, Atari?" After picturing the gameplay in Atari's *Basketball,* Kareem sits, dejectedly cradling his head in his hand, while a little boy gloats over his victory. A baseball hero of the Cincinnati Reds stands at the plate with bat raised. Looking in the camera's direction he says, "Okay, Atari, let's see your best

pitch!" Cut to the umpire: "You're out, Rose!" These humorous scenarios reinforced the activity of video game play by association with athletics and also empowered youthful players to defeat the pros in video simulations of real-life contests. The Brazilian superstar of the New York Cosmos confesses, "I quit soccer to play Atari," but in the next shot a little girl, perhaps his daughter, waves a finger at him, delivering her line in a sing-song voice, "You need more practice, Pelé!" The consumer is invited to develop a skill by playing games, just as one would with a serious sport like soccer or baseball. At the end of the thirty-second spot, a voice-over reminds consumers that the action in Atari would be "on your own TV set." The tagline is spoken: "Don't watch television tonight. Play it!" In such messages, the public image of video games was of something you do on your own TV set, but also of a means of making television do new and exciting and particularly active and competitive things. To "play TV" is to redress the failure of mass media and substitute a new sporting participation, with its promising dimensions of purposive engagement and user control, for the old experience of television as a one-way medium.

Intellivision's TV campaigns addressed similar concerns and fantasies. In every possible way, however, Intellivision sought distinction from its more powerful competitor. Rather than hiring the most famous pro sports heroes of the day, Intellivision cultivated a sophisticated and adult brand identity by choosing as a spokesman George Plimpton, the popular writer whose transatlantic accent announced his high social position. Plimpton had some sports bona fides, having written a first-person account of playing for the Detroit NFL team, *Paper Lion,* as well as essays on golfing and boxing and playing hockey and baseball against pro athletes (he had also performed with the New York Philharmonic and the Ringling Bros. Circus). The name Intellivision was a portmanteau of *intelligent* and *television,* and its tagline and slogan printed on product packaging was "This is intelligent television."[26] This promoted playing video games as something better than ordinary uses of TV, part of the effort at transformation of the feminized passive medium. The suggestion in the name Intellivision was that previously, TV had been an "idiot box," brainless mass culture. The premise of the TV ad campaign was to compare Atari and Intellivision products and show discerning consumers the obvious advantages of Mattel's alternative, especially in

visible qualities of graphics and in the extent of the simulation's accuracy and detail. Some of these ads compared the most popular genre of arcade games of the late 1970s, which helped sell consoles: science-fiction space battles. But Mattel's television campaign also highlighted quite centrally a comparison of Atari's baseball cartridge and Intellivision's *Major League Baseball.*

Two commercials in particular, both of which appeared on TV around 1980, aimed to establish and reinforce sports games as key desirable elements of the home console. Both of them made the graphical display on the television screen into a main selling point, showing the clear contrast between Atari's sports simulation and Intellivision's. The rhetoric of these ads appeals to the authenticity and fidelity of representation. The intelligent consumer is naturally expected to prefer the choice that is closest to the real thing. The better game is the one that most faithfully re-creates the sport of baseball as played in the major leagues. This is hardly a new discourse, as the same logic of realism informed earlier games such as APBA and Strat-o-Matic, which were distinguished from rivals by statistical and scientific claims to fidelity. An investment in this quality was also familiar from the discourses of audio reproduction and home stereo electronics.

Both Intellivision TV spots feature comparisons of baseball games, while one also includes a comparison of the two brands' football titles. In both instances, the side-by-side, back-and-forth form recalls the classic comparative advertising strategy familiar, for instance, from cleaning products campaigns. In this instance, however, the point is not to show the superiority of one product over another in efficiency or power, but to illustrate the ability of an electronic simulation to re-create a professional sporting event as one would watch it on television or play it as a competitor. In the more simple and direct commercial, Plimpton faces the camera dressed in a jacket and tie, smiling at the audience. His class and intellect are the basis for Mattel's appeal to authority, inviting the audience's trust. "Here's an easy question for you," he begins. "Which of these things is closest to the real thing? A. Intellivision *Major League Baseball.* B. Atari baseball. Here they are again close up. A. Intellivision. B. Atari." The tone here is generously professorial, even Socratic; the question is so readily answered. It concludes, "If you thought A. Intel-

livision, you're absolutely correct. You see, I told you this question was easy." All the while, the image alternates shots of the games, in which the primitive qualities of the representation of Atari's version are contrasted against the greater detail in Intellivision's.

Another spot shows Plimpton sitting in a wing chair in what initially appears to be a den or club, though as the camera moves we see that it is more like a family room. He is in a jacket but with his shirt open at the neck, a well-off man at leisure. A graphic identifies him as a "famous author & gamesman." Children beside him are playing games on a pair of television sets, one Atari and the other Intellivision. "I'll try almost anything," he begins, calling on the audience's memory of his journalistic exploits. "So when Mattel Electronics asked me to compare their television games with Atari, I gave it a try. I compared Atari baseball with Intellivision and found Intellivision played much more like real baseball. Then I compared Atari football with Intellivision. Again Intellivision played more like the real game. In my opinion if you try them both, there's only one conclusion you can come to. Intellivision from Mattel Electronics." In the case of the football comparison, we are shown two representations of the game that are substantially different. Atari's version shows the field oriented vertically, with end zones at top and bottom and no marked yard lines. Intellivision's field is oriented horizontally, and numbered yard lines and player figures add more detail. The Mattel image looks a bit more like the image of televised football, though like Atari's it is rather abstract, particularly in comparison with the *Madden* game imagery of several decades later. The Mattel versions also differ in sound effects, offering synthesized bits of noise mimicking a ball sailing through the air and crowds cheering in comparison to Atari's generic beeps and blips.

Many early video game advertisements, for various types of games, addressed male players in particular. While the term *gamer* was not yet used as it would be in subsequent years, some of the gendered associations of that classification were falling into place.[27] The masculine gendering of video games had many causes. It is, moreover, an ongoing and complex dynamic that includes technologies, representations, and social practices and ways of understanding and that overlaps with other vectors of identity.[28] In the early period of console games when Intellivision and

Atari competed for the consumer's attention and money, the presumed masculinity of video games extended not only to typically male interests such as team sports, but also to the practices and values of boy culture that were not specific to sports per se, but would include any kind of competitive play. The idea that through new technology, one could play at a high level against great competitors, and that this experience would be like real sports, appealed to boy culture fantasies of physical achievement and mastery, recognition for these accomplishments, and role-playing adult identities.[29] Both the Atari and the Intellivision campaigns made video games into surrogates for athletic exploits outside of the rec rooms and basements where these amusements would be found, tapping into a long-standing practice of American boys (and boys in many other cultures) pretending to be their heroes on the playing fields and courts. Even as the newest high-tech gadgets, home video games were still selling old-fashioned fantasies of masculine self-actualization and achievement. The realism promised in ads for sports games was one important way in which the new medium developed as a form of boy culture.

CONCLUSION: SPORTS AND THE CULTURAL STATUS OF A NEW MEDIUM

Between the time when video games were introduced to the public in the early 1970s and the moment by which they had become a pop culture craze in the early 1980s, making the cover of *Time,* an identity was developing for the new medium.[30] A medium's identity, its cultural status and place in popular imagination, is a product of many factors and influences. It can be shifting and contradictory. Technologies are not destined to have particular uses or meanings, but arise to meet social needs and develop according to these, often in ways unforeseen by those who invent and produce them. In the early periods of any medium's emergence, we often find a certain flexibility in its identity. Video games were positioned through many competing and complementary discourses, including advertising and promotion, popular press coverage, product packaging, and the games themselves. They emerged into particular social contexts of amusement and leisure. As electronics, they had the cachet of the latest high-tech gadgetry. When they were new, it was not predestined that

they would become so closely associated with youth and masculinity. Their first players were adults. Computer games emerged in institutional settings, in places like MIT and Stanford, and *Pong* had its debut in a bar. Early game advertising appealed to adults more than children and offered video games as family amusement to bring together players of various ages, both male and female.

Sports games were one important part of the story of video games' development toward the cultural status they would arrive at. The centrality of sports to the genres of early games, and to the conception of the video game console as a way of remaking the TV into a participatory cultural form, shaped the medium's identity. Early games remediated types of amusement and recreation that were already well established as masculine, such as simulation of professional sporting competition. They also made over the television set to integrate it into this tradition of gendered play. In doing so they renewed its identity, and it was reconceived as a playing field, a fresh conception for a familiar appliance.

This was part of a wider phenomenon in the 1970s and 1980s of the mediation of leisure and of the indoorsification of American childhood in particular and American life more generally, as suburban sprawl and fears about unsupervised children transformed the geography of American childhood.[31] Video games might have seemed like something new, and as technology they introduced previously unknown experiences of electronically mediated recreation. They also were a novel way of continuing established practices and the values and ideals associated with them. Sports video games, from *Pong* to *Major League Baseball* and beyond, presented new ways of doing old things. Jocktronics was not the only way of thinking about video games, but even if the name didn't stick, the connotations it expressed of high-tech, masculine, competitive amusement were powerful forces in shaping the medium as a cultural form, enduring long after Atari's and Intellivision's 8-bit sports cartridges had passed from the scene.

NOTES

1. On *Tennis for Two,* see Van Burnham, *Supercade: A Visual History of the*   *Videogame Age, 1971–1984* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), 28; and *When Games*

Went Click: The Story of Tennis for Two (2013), a documentary video directed by Vlad Yudin. On *Pong,* see Henry Lowood, "Video Games in Computer Space: A Complex History of *Pong,*" *IEEE Annals of the History of Computing* (July–September 2009): 5–19.

2. Two popular accounts are Roberto Dillon, *The Golden Age of Video Games: The Birth of a Multi-million-Dollar Industry* (Boca Raton, FL: A. K. Peters / CRC Press, 2011), 14–20; and Tristan Donovan, *Replay: The History of Video Games* (East Sussex, UK: Yellow Ant, 2010), 15–27.

3. Charles Musser, *The Emergence of Cinema: The American Screen to 1907* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

4. Leonard Herman, "Ball-and-Paddle Consoles," in *Before the Crash: Early Video Game History,* edited by Mark J. P. Wolf (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2012), 53–59.

5. My usage of "popular imagination" follows William Boddy, *New Media and Popular Imagination: Launching Radio, Television, and Digital Media in the United States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

6. For more on the Brown Box and Odyssey, see Ralph H. Baer, *Videogames: In the Beginning* (Springfield, NJ: Rolenta Press, 2005).

7. Robert Cantwell, "The Fun Machines," *Sports Illustrated,* July 4, 1977, 24–29.

8. Nic Costa, *Automatic Pleasures: The History of the Coin Machine* (London: Kevin Frances, 1988), 17, 137, 140–143.

9. Sandy Treadwell, "Dice Ball Keeps the Mind Fit," *Sports Illustrated,* November 17, 1969, 107–109.

10. Donovan, *Replay,* 22.

11. Henry Jenkins, "Complete Freedom of Movement: Video Games as Gendered Play Spaces," in *The Game Design Reader: A Rules of Play Anthology,* edited by Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006), 330–363. "Virtual play spaces" comes from Jenkins.

12. Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999).

13. On the history of television's cultural status, see Michael Z. Newman and Elana Levine, *Legitimating Television: Media Convergence and Cultural Status* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 14–37.

14. Michael Z. Newman, *Video Revolutions: On the History of a Medium* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 17–44. On discourses of cable television, see Thomas Streeter, "Blue Skies and Strange Bedfellows: The Discourse of Cable Television," in *The Revolution Wasn't Televised: Sixties Television and Social Conflict,* edited by Lynn Spigel and Michael Curtin (New York: Routledge, 1997), 221–242. On the relation between video games and video art, see Jason Wilson, "'Participation TV': Videogame Archaeology and New Media Art," in *The Pleasures of Computer Gaming: Essays on Cultural History, Theory, and Aesthetics,* edited by Melanie Swalwell and Jason Wilson (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2008), 94–117.

15. On the feminization of broadcasting and television in particular, see Boddy, *New Media and Popular Imagination;* Newman and Levine, *Legitimating Television;* and Lynn Spigel, *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

16. "Magnavox Unveils TV Game Simulator," *New York Times,* May 11, 1972; Peter Ross Range, "The Space-Age Pinball Machine," *New York Times Magazine,* September 15, 1974; "Modern Living: Screen Games," *Time,* May 22, 1972.

17. Larry Steckler, "TV Games at Home," *Radio Electronics,* December 1975, 29.

18. Dick Pietschmann, "The New Fun World of Video Games," *Mechanix Illustrated,* January 1975, 36.

19. "TV's New Superhit: Jocktronics," *Time,* December 13, 1976.

20. Hans Magnus Enzesberger, *The Consciousness Industry: On Literature, Politics, and the Media* (New York: Seabury Press, 1974), 97.

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22. "Instant Replay," *Newsweek,* October 30, 1972, 75; "The Fancy New Video Games," *Changing Times,* November 1978, 43.

23. "Home Video Game Warfare Erupts on Television," *Broadcasting,* March 1, 1982, 64.

24. "Why Electronic Games Will Be Hard to Find," *Business Week,* November 17, 1979, 52.

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26. Scott Sherman, "In His League: Being George Plimpton," *Nation,* February 2, 2009. On Intellivision's name and its effort to give television an "extreme makeover," see Sheila E. Murphy, *How Television Invented New Media* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2011), 50.

27. Adrienne Shaw, "Do You Identify as a Gamer? Gender, Race, Sexuality, and Gamer Identity," *New Media and Society* 14 (2012): 25–41.

28. Michael Z. Newman and John Vanderhoef, "Masculinity," in *The Routledge Companion to Video Game Studies,* edited by Mark J. P. Wolf and Bernard Perron (New York: Routledge, 2014), 380–387.

29. Jenkins, "Complete Freedom of Movement."

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31. Steven Mintz, *Huck's Raft: A History of American Childhood* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), 347.