

SPACE INVADERS: REPRESENTATION OF HISTORIC SPACEFLIGHT IN VIDEO GAME CULTURE, 1977-1989

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Why?

- Video games have developed rapidly as a medium for storytelling over the last fifty years or so.
- Simultaneously, space flight has gone through rapid advancement, and video games have frequently portrayed this.
- Though other aspects of culture have explored space-flight - such as the Apollo-Soyuz stamp below - few have been so widely permeated by its themes.



Aim and Method

- Examine an instance of history influencing video games and the surrounding culture.
- Casual fans of video games are well aware of the prevalence of science fiction in the culture.
- The golden era of the arcade especially was steeped in sci-fi imagery.
- The research undertaken will demonstrate the influence of historic spaceflight in the development of this imagery.
- Particular attention should be paid to the US-Soviet Space Race and the American space program.

- Approach to this research influenced by postmodernist theory.
- Although the text of the games examined is fictitious, they still reveal the feelings and opinions of those the developers. By considering not just the games themselves but also supplementary material in the form of magazines and adverts, we can understand how these games were received.

The reception of games offers a glimpse into how wider society engaged with the themes presented.



- Work was largely source based, and undertaken in two stages. First, reviewing of supplementary material available through online archives.
- Second, I visited the National Video Game Museum in Sheffield to engage with relevant primary sources first hand. Pictured right is the Midway Space Invaders arcade cabinet, exhibited at the NVM. Space Invaders is one of the most iconic video games of all time, and although Japanese-developed it is largely responsible for the widespread success of Arcades in the late 1970s.

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Astro Wars: Conflict beyond cooperation?

- Grandstand was a British company that specialised in the production of tabletop video games during the 1970s and 1980s, and Astro Wars was one of their biggest successes.
- Capitalising on the popularity of video games such as Space Invaders and Galaxian, the player must guide a spaceship through waves of oncoming enemies, blasting them as they move down the screen.
- Notably, however, if a player achieves a high enough score in a game of Astro Wars, they are given the opportunity to earn bonus points by completing a docking 'minigame'.
- This is significant in that it represents an example of cooperation in space, rather than conflict.



- Docking represents the coming together of two separate entities to create a unified one. Six years before Astro Wars was released, the historic Apollo-Soyuz mission took place, which involved the docking of US and Soviet spacecraft in a show of scientific unity.

Big K Magazine: A British perspective on Galactic Gaming

- Big K magazine was a video game magazine produced in the mid 1980s, running from April 1984 until March of 1985.
- Although short lived, the magazine provides a valuable insight into British video game culture during this period.
- Sci-Fi theming is a core aspect of the magazine - it was even published by the company behind 2000AD comics.
- Every issue of Big K included a number of game programs readers could type into their home computers.
- In the first issue of Big K, 80% of the type-in games included were science fiction; one of these games directly mentioned NASA.
- Of the type-in game programs included across the run, 27% of them were Sci-Fi themed.
- Although not every issue included type-in programs that were related to spaceflight, every issue reviewed at least one science fiction video game.



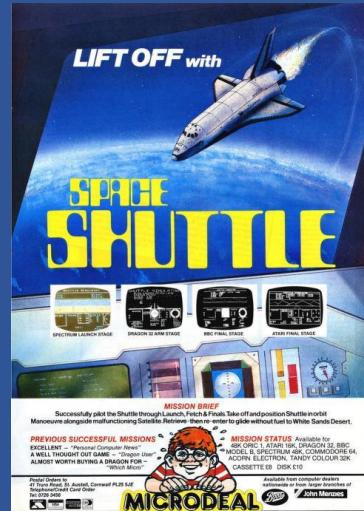
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Conclusions

- It is clear that from the earliest development of video game culture, science-fiction was a major appeal.
- It is also evident that British games developers and publishers were integral to establishing this connection.
- The success of games like Space Invaders, Astro Wars and Phoenix shows the prevalence of violence in the genre.
- Inclusions of non-violent aspects of space exploration are still common, however - especially in British games.
- As well as the docking minigame from Astro Wars, there are several more realistic portrayals of spaceflight by British developers featured in Big K magazine. A notable example would be the British-made Space Shuttle simulation game from Microdeal. Although an American space program, one of the earliest pieces of media to feature it is British.



Next Steps

- The research conducted has highlighted that there is a high degree of complexity to the relationship between video games and historic spaceflight.
- However, a longer-form project would be able to yield further results.
- The Big K magazine run offers a treasure trove of games - many from British developers - which invite further exploration.
- The space shuttle poster, left, highlights just one of these games.
- In future, I hope to delve deeper into the portrayal of historic spaceflight in video games, and potentially other mediums for comparison.
- Spaceflight remains incredibly relevant today through the corporate space race, and by examining the history driving these rivalries we can better understand the state of space exploration today.