



Racing the Beam: The Atari Video Computer System (Platform Studies)

By Nick Montfort, Ian Bogost

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The Atari Video Computer System dominated the home video game market so completely that "Atari" became the generic term for a video game console. The Atari VCS was affordable and offered the flexibility of changeable cartridges. Nearly a thousand of these were created, the most significant of which established new techniques, mechanics, and even entire genres. This book offers a detailed and accessible study of this influential video game console from both computational and cultural perspectives.

Studies of digital media have rarely investigated platforms--the systems underlying computing. This book (the first in a series of Platform Studies) does so, developing a critical approach that examines the relationship between platforms and creative expression. Nick Montfort and Ian Bogost discuss the Atari VCS itself and examine in detail six game cartridges: *Combat*, *Adventure*, *Pac-Man*, *Yars' Revenge*, *Pitfall!*, and *Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back*. They describe the technical constraints and affordances of the system and track developments in programming, gameplay, interface, and aesthetics. *Adventure*, for example, was the first game to represent a virtual space larger than the screen (anticipating the boundless virtual spaces of such later games as *World of Warcraft* and *Grand Theft Auto*), by allowing the player to walk off one side into another space; and *Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back* was an early instance of interaction between media properties and video games. Montfort and Bogost show that the Atari VCS--often considered merely a retro fetish object--is an essential part of the history of video games.

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Editorial Review

Review

Montfort & Bogost raise the bar on anyone wishing to talk meaningfully about computer culture. Not only must we interpret these machines, we must first know how they work -- and yes, sometimes this means knowing assembly code. From chip to controller, the authors lead us with ease through the Atari "2600" Video Computer System, one of the most emblematic devices in recent mass culture.

(Alexander Galloway, Associate Professor of Culture and Communication, New York University, and author of *Protocol: How Control Exists After Decentralization*)

Montfort and Bogost's analysis is both technically detailed and historically contextualized, both informative and methodologically instructive. They write with a rigor and grace that future contributors to the series may be at pains to match.

(Seth Perlow, *Convergence*)

Read it, it will do you good.

(**José P. Zagal** *Game Studies*)

Racing the Beam doesn't spare the technical details, but is always accessible and compelling. Downright thrilling at times, in fact, a sort of *The Right Stuff* of video game development.

(Darren Zenko *thestar.com* (*Toronto Star*))

About the Author

Nick Montfort is Assistant Professor of Digital Media at MIT. He is the author of *Twisty Little Passages: A New Approach to Interactive Fiction* and the coeditor of *The New Media Reader*, both published by The MIT Press. Ian Bogost is Assistant Professor in the School of Literature, Communication, and Culture, at Georgia Institute of Technology and Founding Partner, Persuasive Games LLC. He is the author of *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogame Criticism* and *Unit Operations: An Approach to Videogame Criticism*, both published by the MIT Press.

Users Review

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