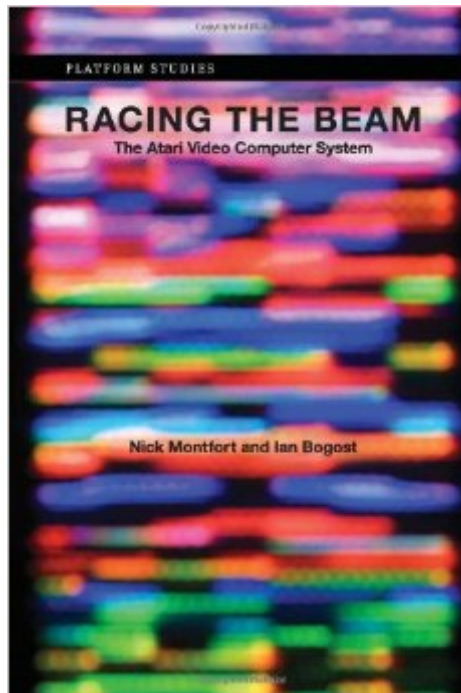


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Racing The Beam: The Atari Video Computer System (Platform Studies)



Synopsis

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.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

What a fascinating book. It's a terrific idea to examine the iconic Atari 2600 in this way, and the authors do a good job of exploring it at the lowest levels. They make a good case that the physical hardware design directly influenced the design of some of the device's most famous (and infamous) games, and that those early design tradeoffs themselves led to certain conventions still apparent in modern video game design. The book's organized around several key game cartridges, each of which is a case study to point out some aspect of the technical or cultural impact of the Atari; it's a really good way to organize the narrative. If you've only ever worked with "modern" graphic computer technology (i.e. anything with pixels), you'll be really amazed at what the Atari programmers were able to do with the unbelievable constraints they had to work with. One of the most incredible things I learned was that the system had only 128 bytes of RAM, not even enough to store this sentence in memory. In contrast, the cheap laptop I'm writing this on has more than 9 million times as much RAM available. That is an almost unimaginable difference in scale. Unfortunately, the book is really poorly written. The two authors obviously divided the subject into cultural and technical sections, each covering their own turf. The book tends to go back and forth between these topics, so there are weird changes in tone, references to ideas that haven't been introduced clearly, and an annoying use of jargon. Overall, the book suffers from the academic tendency to try to point out even the most mundane and obvious details ("the joysticks were connected to the unit by cables") as well as a total lack of understanding what the reader may know coming to the book.

"Racing The Beam" is a book on a delicious subject that suffers from serving multiple masters. Who is the target demographic here - is it the technogeek enthusiast? Or the Wired cultural sociologist? Maybe it's the Retro Gamer reader who has fond memories of the VCS platform and is looking for a bit of behind-the-scenes action. Authors Nick Monfort and Ian Bogost, whom seem to be hewing to the publisher's adage that every equation cuts your book sales in half, do the reader no favors by leaving out such appendix gold as a memory/register map of the VCS and something along the lines of a brief "Hello World" code example. Sound, which is the other half of the equation, gets even shorter shrift - if the hardware supposedly can't synthesize a chromatic scale in tune, how did later programmers like Synthcart's Paul Slocum get around this? One of the book's problems is that the authors try to make the book seem timely by trying to force connections between its vintage software biopics and such breathtakingly unrelated modern titles as World Of Warcraft, Grand Theft Auto, and Tony Hawk Pro Skater. It's almost like the publisher was feeling nervous that nobody of college age could relate to such early games, which is a shame given that the stories are all

fascinating in their own right. And on the hardware side, while the Apple II and C-64 get brief nods why are no comparisons drawn between the Atari VCS and Jay Miner's later designs incl. the Atari 400, 800 and Amiga? And what were the specs of the Mattel Intellivision anyway, seeing as how it gets mentioned so often as the VCS's main rival? Any reader old enough to remember this hardware as a wood-grain box is probably going to have a few comments bordering on the personal, but let's keep things short.

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