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Hollywood Is Game

If Hollywood lolled on the beach of profits and perquisites in recent years when videogames began vying for entertainment dollars and quarters, it has learned better. Videogames have become more than simply a lollipop contribution to the corporate coffers; they have come of age. Wall Street traders bought up the relevant feature film company stocks, as well as that of the game merchandisers, because they passed the quarter-arcades on their way home and recognized the arrival of the new nickel-odeons.

Says Polygram producer Adam Fields, "All the studios now clearly recognize the enormous potential in the videogame business. I think Warner showed them what Atari can do for a company. Once it was a mighty film company, now it's Atari that's the leader."

Despite the early December debacle on the floor of the N.Y. Stock Exchange that knocked the videogame stocks down by as much as 33% per share overnight, as happened to Warner Communications (Atari), Hollywood is something of a corporate pervert: It'll cross-breed with any new species.

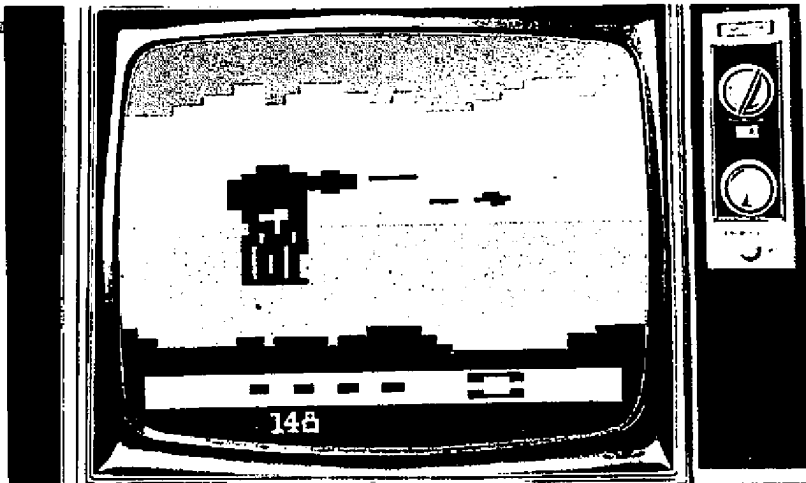
To wit:

§ Six months after Steven Spielberg's *Poltergeist* was released, owners of Radio Shack's TRS-80 Color Computer were on their own videogame quest to rescue young Carol Anne Freeling. They must zip through the busy streets of Westhaven, clamber up a stairway frequented by "voids" and spirits and, finally, confront the poltergeist in its own energy field.

§ Paramount Pictures Corp. has taken a second look at its games subsidiary, Sega Enterprises, Inc., and *Star Trek* is the reason why. Not long after *Star Trek II* took in \$76 million last summer, they decided that the good Starship Enterprise would confront the nasty Klingons in an arcade game by Christmas.

§ Before Atari shipped a single *E.T.* cartridge, it was predicted that the home game, like its feature film parent, would be a hit. It hasn't yet been, but just think: If the *E.T.* cartridge sells to just half of the eight to ten million Atari VCS 2600 owners, Atari will gross about \$132 million.

§ While *Tron*, the Disney film, was still trying to reach the break-even



The Empire Strikes Back

point, *Tron*, the arcade game from Bally-Midway, had already enjoyed several weeks of being the pick-hit among game players. Licensing divisions took note.

Atari had already secured the rights to *Raiders of the Lost Ark* from Lucasfilm Ltd. as the *Tron* phenomenon was unfolding. The *Raiders* cartridge, made for the VCS system, and released in late '82, features just about everything the film did, and more: whips, snakes, magic flutes, sheiks and, of course, Dr. Indiana Jones.

Atari wasted no time in bringing the *E.T.* game to the public once the license was acquired. Implementing a special plan, the game was conceived, the program written, and the cartridges manufactured in a record-breaking 16 weeks in a process that normally spans nine to twelve months.

Assuming the role of E.T., the player must assemble a device to—yes—phone home. Aiding E.T. is Elliott, who has energy-giving powers to thwart the pursuing G-Men and scientists. Atari also has the rights to produce home video game cartridges based on Columbia Pictures' forthcoming fantasy film *Krull* while Columbia's games subsidiary, D. Gottlieb & Co., will create arcade video and pinball games based on the film's settings and characters.

Parker Brothers, not Atari, has the license for the home game rights to *Star Wars*. Last summer Parker released *The Empire Strikes Back* cartridge, the first of four games that the company will do based on the science-fiction saga. That cartridge, which recreated the battle scene on the ice planet Hoth, sold one million copies, or \$20 million, by year's end. Just out is *Jedi Arena*, based on the first *Star Wars* feature, in which the player is Luke Skywalker, wielding a light sabre against the computer or an-

other opponent. In May, to coincide with the release of the third film in the series, the *Return of the Jedi* game will be available. The final *Star Wars* game installment, due in the latter part of the year, hasn't been announced.

Due to contractual problems Parker has scrapped plans for a home game based on *Jaws*, but James Bond 007 will be in stores in time for the two Bond films coming out this summer: *Octopussy*, starring Roger Moore, and *Never Say Never Again*, with Sean Connery. In the 007 game, Bond must piece together clues to a mystery, while villains pursue him "by boat, car, airplane, even on foot." Parker is also basing a game on *The Lord of the Rings*.

Out of the mainstream and straight to the cultists, Wizard Video Games, a subsidiary of Wizard Video, is bringing *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* to the home screen. Billed as the "first violent game," *Chainsaw* offers the option of taking on Leatherface or his innocent victim. Wizard also announced the "first adult video game ever," a cartridge based on *Flesh Gordon*, but has since reconsidered. In its place, Wizard has slotted *Halloween*, the second violent video game ever. The third, *Conan the Barbarian*, a late '82 release from Astro-cade, features swordplay and monsters in a series of dungeons.

Spectravision last year came out with *China Syndrome*, where the player becomes the supervisor of Spectra Island's nuclear power plant after nine game levels have been completed. Before 20th Century Fox Films had a games subsidiary of its own, it licensed *Towering Inferno* to U.S. Games. The object here is to helicopter yourself to the flaming downtown skyscraper and rescue as many people as possible for points: one point for each flame extinguished, twenty-five for each survivor.

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Last year Universal Studios licensed *King Kong* to Tigervision. After perching the girl atop the Empire State Building, Kong hurls bombs down onto the climbing player. Jump a bomb, score some points. Miss and you're blown to bits. Three misses and no miss, the game's over.

In *Fantastic Voyage* (Fox Video Games) the player maneuvers a submarine through the body of a dying scientist while battling white corpuscles. The sub must reach a clot near the brain and destroy it before time runs out. *Fantastic Voyage* was shipped to stores at the end of '82 along with a maze game based on *Alien* (where the dots along the way are not power pellets but alien eggs) and a *Megaforce* game, in which the player controls a fighting machine called a Moto-Fighter used to destroy enemy headquarters. Also on Fox's agenda are games based on *MASH*, *9 to 5*, *Porky's*, and *Six Pack*.

MCA-Universal, which formed a games division last year, is discussing arcade games of two summer '83 releases, *Jaws 3-D* and *Smokey is the Bandit*. CBS Video Games, another new subsidiary, reports it has no immediate plans to join the fray, although it has looked at scripts and films in production to gauge the possibilities.

As the film and videogame industries work closer together, the release of new films and games will be timed, a la *Tron* and *Krull*. Near completion of the film, director Jim Henson gave software company Sierra On-Line Systems the go-ahead for a *Dark Crystal* computer game. Sierra co-founder Roberta Williams wrote an adventure program using characters and scenes from the movie. "Henson Associates is really excited about this project," she says, "because they have all these movies and creative ideas, and here, all of a sudden, is this

whole medium where they can have the same plot and script it out, just like the movies. But, with the game, the person feels much more control over his destiny and what's happening than he would just watching the movie."

The new wrinkle is to develop films and games concurrently. *Spaceblasters*, a CBS theatrical and Polygram co-venture, concerns a group of videogame whiz kids who, through a series of unusual circumstances, are called upon to save the world via their gaming skills. The arcade game mimics the film. No longer a Christmas '82 release, *Spaceblasters* is delayed due to changes in the script.

In 1981, Richard Spitalny and Bill Blake formed Pona Star, a joint venture that spun off a game division in one year's time, First Star Software. They signed Fernando Herrera, game designer and winner of Atari's first annual Star Award of Merit, to a long-term contract. Together, they are planning *Arcade*, a film that stars a videogame called *Savior One*. A sleuth must track down missing children, all high scorers on the *Savior One* game. As the screenwriter writes *Arcade*, Herrera designs the *Savior One* game for a simultaneous release.

So sold are the First Star people on videogame tie-ins with new movies, they've set up a service to read and review completed scripts or works in development to uncover the videogame within. If there is no game inherent in the script, First Star will tell the client what has to be changed in the script in order to get one.

The lesson of that depressed middle-aged man who dreamed of playing center-field for the Yankees and nearly became damned has not been learned. Change what you will in the script, but first start with your soul.

—SUE ADAMO

Video games Pro-Rated

It is surprising that it was the Japanese and Americans who fiddled around with their Sony TV sets and arrived at videogames. Neither culture accepts the idea of inevitable defeat. Videogames are so much more Italian or French: play a little, make a gallant show of it, and move over. There's another army behind yours.

You win no money; you wield no power; you only postpone catastrophe. But after being zapped into oblivion, the good wizards of videogames have granted a kind of achievable immortality; if you're good enough you can sign your name. If that ain't art, what is?

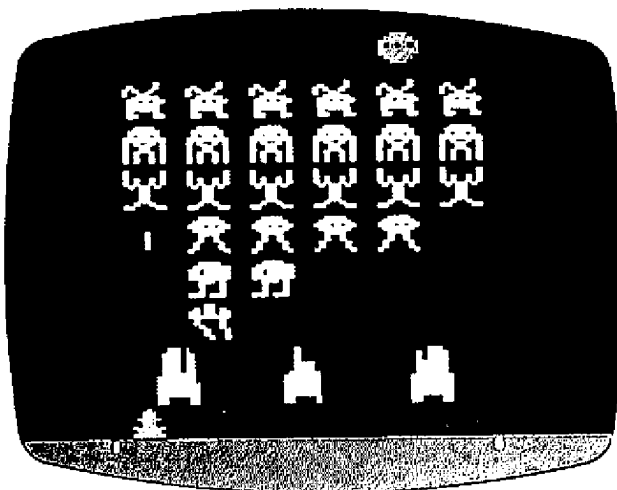
Well, we save *Guernica* and *Beat the Devil*, but the betting is—right now—that we'll pitch *Frogger*. It's a little game about a stout-hearted frog—you—trying to cross life's highway, ford life's stream, pick up a mate on the way and get home. Home. Tom Wolfe's home in Asheville, James Agee's home in Knoxville, your home at the end of the day full of tears.

You never save a continent in *Missile Command* from nuclear splatter, you only put off the party. You are a grown-up on a joystick in defense of civilization; the arcades are full of you—men in ties, perfect specimens of the actuarial tables, twisting your sagging frames around these 25-cent machines to battle the dark princes, forgetting for awhile that there are forms to fill out, that Bernice needs her vitamin C and you forgot to pick it up. But you've scored 36,000.

Whooee, 36,000. If your small achievement of having lasted longer than those who have gone before you is soon erased by the next generation, then you must face facts: you have acted with the heart of Winston Churchill or Audie Murphy, and no one will remember your name. Worse, they unplug the machines at night, emptying their brains, and like the Dark Ages, we start over each day.

The following videogames have been rated. There is no Toward A Theory of Videogames at work, though the vision imposed on the screen and the sound extracted from it were noticed. The struggle's worth and grace are what matter.

Q*BERT(****)—You're a red thing with a nose and feet dropped onto a



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