PIXELS IN PRINT (PART 1): ADVERTISING COMPUTER SPACE – THE FIRST ARCADE VIDEO GAME

To advertise the first commercial video game, marketers took inspiration from an unlikely source.

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How do you market video games to a world that's never heard of them?

This was the challenge faced by the pioneers who turned video games into an industry. There was no established audience, no established template, and no established language for advertising this technology. The first marketers of video game had to make it up as they went along.

This is the story of the first attempt, targeted at arcade operators who were looking to make a profit of their own.

Creating The First Arcade Video Game

In 1969, aspiring entrepreneur Nolan Bushnell witnessed a demonstration that would not only change his life, it would set him on a course to change the world.

It was a computer program at Stanford called *Spacewar!*, a competitive two-player game that involved maneuvering spaceships around the simulated gravity of a central star while shooting at each other. Today we'd call it a video game, but that term didn't exist yet. https://www.youtube.com/embed/1EWQYAfuMYw *Spacewar!* played on a PDP-1 in 2017.

Spacewar! was created in 1962 as a fun and interactive way to show off the capabilities of the PDP-1, a large and expensive computer that was considered a "minicomputer" because it wasn't as large and expensive as the typical '60s computer.

The developers of the game had given no thought to trying to monetize it, but Nolan Bushnell had once run a penny arcade back in college, and he immediately saw coin-op potential. He spent the next two years conceptualizing an arcade version, partnering with two co-workers from his day job at Ampex, a developer of cutting edge recording technology. The trio decided to call themselves Syzygy, a word describing when three or more objects in space align.

< https://gamehistory.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/image2.png>

`A syzygy occuring in` *2001: A Space Odyssey* `from 1968.`
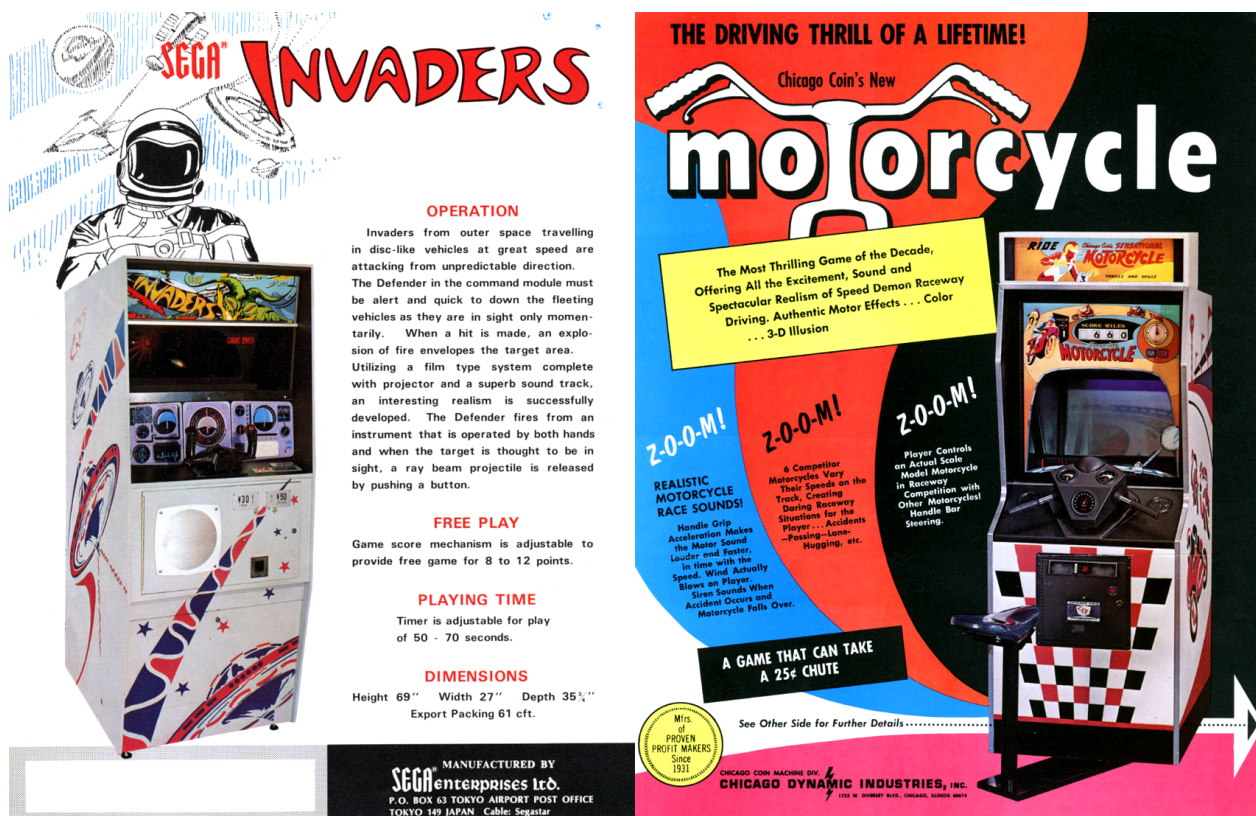
But they soon realized that any machine advanced enough to run *Spacewar!* was going to be too expensive to mass-produce as a coin-op. Syzygy was forced to simplify the game < https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0ph5dcoMeTM> .

They removed the gravitational star from the center, and replaced the second player with rudimentary AI enemies. It was now an affordable single-player UFO-shooter, and Syzygy struck a deal with local coin-op manufacturer Nutting Associates to produce it.

But how to promote it?

Arcade Games In The Pre-Video Era

If you're a manufacturer of coin-op machines, your customers aren't the people pumping coins into the machines — your customers are the operators who buy and place the machines. Advertising to operators means taking out ads in trade magazines and sending out flyers.

< https://gamehistory.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/image3.png>

`Two examples of arcade flyers from 1970.`

Although coin-op video games didn't exist yet, coin-op arcade games did. They even looked a lot like modern arcade cabinets, just instead of a TV screen, the playfield was made up of lights and moving parts, and sometimes a projector. Today we call these electro-mechanical games, but some of the manufacturers' names might still sound familiar to you: companies like Midway, Williams, and Sega.

In fact, Sega played a major role in revitalizing the American arcade industry in 1968 with the release of an ambitious machine called *Periscope*, which popularized quarter play back when most games cost a dime.

< https://gamehistory.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/image7.png>

Periscope flyer from 1968.

The three biggest hit arcade games of the late '60s were *Periscope*, Chicago Coin's *Speedway* < https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ao8-I8tWtTw> in 1969, and Nutting Associates' *Computer Quiz* < https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zr98ASLdbZQ> .

Introduced in 1967, *Computer Quiz* had a very different look from other arcade games at the time. The cabinet that looked more like a modern retro ATM than a game, and it was missing the usual side art and colorful marquee illustration.

This was likely done on purpose, to play up that this wasn't a mere game — it was also educational.

< https://gamehistory.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/image12.png>

Computer Quiz flyer from 1967, front and back.

"Educates as it fascinates." The flyer continued the theme, eschewing an exciting and colorful layout in favor of something that looks like it came out of a textbook. And it worked, at least initially. This was a time when coin-ops

were still associated with organized crime in a lot of people's minds, and *Computer Quiz* felt safe.

Safe, but also maybe a little boring.

A year later, Nutting Associates started to spice up their advertising. It began with a full page magazine ad — a rarity for an arcade game — that appeared in trade publication Cash Box.

< https://gamehistory.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/image1.png>

`Left:` *Computer Quiz* `ad from Cash Box (Jul 6, 1968),` `Right:` `Volkswagen ad from 1967.`

I don't think it's an accident that Nutting's ad mimicked the format of Volkswagen ads. For one thing, it was an extremely popular ad campaign throughout the '60s, and is still considered possibly the most influential ad campaigns of all time < http://adage.com/article/special-report-the-advertising-century/ad-age-advertising-century-top-100-advertising-campaigns/140150/> .

But also, the Volkswagen was an squat, ugly car trying to compete in a well-established American market where being stylish and enormous mattered more than being solid and efficient.

The ad campaign played up these differences, breaking all the rules in the process. Car ads never used photographs because it was felt they made cars look "dumpy" in comparison to idealized illustrations, often featuring the cars in beautiful settings; Volkswagen ads used only photographs of the car, almost always set against a blank white background. American cars were always trying to be bigger and roomier; Volkswagen asked Americans to "[Think Small < http://archive.fortune.com/galleries/2009/fortune/0908/gallery.iconic_ads.fortune/index.html>](http://archive.fortune.com/galleries/2009/fortune/0908/gallery.iconic_ads.fortune/index.html) ," forty years before Apple asked them to "Think Different."

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Incidentally, the first year or so of ads only referred to the car as a "VW," which might be why "NA" is attempting to explain what "CQ" means.

However, there are also a few ways in which Nutting's ad diverges from the Volkswagen philosophy. Volkswagen ads avoided the cliche of happy, beautiful people that show you how happy and beautiful you will be if you buy one.

Volkswagen ads also used a lot of humor, at a time when humor in ads was considered off-limits. "People do not buy from clowns," was the popular wisdom parroted by every other ad agency. Volkswagen ads often went for self-deprecating humor, at that. But I don't think Nutting was ready to admit that Computer Quiz was squat and ugly.

Later that year, the ads moved even further from "safe" and into...sexy?

< https://gamehistory.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/image9.png>
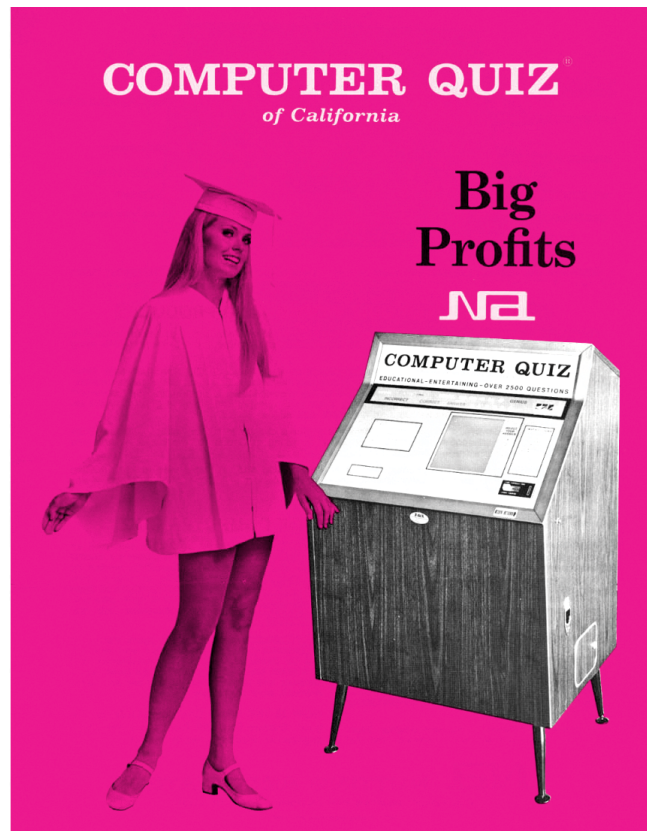
Left: Nutting ad from Cash Box (Oct 12, 1968), **Right:** *Computer Quiz* flyer from 1968.

Booth babes and products under wraps were fixtures of auto shows, and Nutting tried to channel that for the announcement of two new games to debut at MOA, a trade show for coin-op machines. The same model posed next to *Computer Quiz* in a redesigned flyer that cries out for a slogan like "Smart Is Sexy."

Around this time, other manufacturer's arcade flyers were moving from limited color to full color printing. Whether for budget reasons or just to stand out from the crowd, Nutting stuck with the limited color look — and models posed next to machines — well into 1970.

But now it was 1971, and none of Nutting's other games were catching on like *Computer Quiz* had. Nutting needed another big hit. To capitalize on the

recognizable name, Syzygy's UFO-shooter became *Computer Space*.

Promoting The First Arcade Video Game

Despite the similar name, *Computer Space* was a very different type of game. Nobody had seen an arcade use a TV set as a play-field before, and that was sure to attract attention. But to get people in front of the screen, the cabinet itself needed to stand out.

The cabinet was still free of illustrations, but instead of squat and boxy it became tall and curvy, with a shiny car-like finish. The molded fiberglass shape looked like a sci-fi prop (and even showed up for a cameo in 1973's *Soylent Green < https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s5sOuWHwgE4>*).

< https://gamehistory.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/computer_space_large.jpg>

`Computer Space` flyer from 1971, front and back.

The flyer still had a model posing next to the game, but now her face was serious instead of smiling. The image was finally printed in full color, but still without the usual illustrations or garish blasts of color that were the trend. It looked like a car ad.

A car ad, but not of the Volkswagen variety. I have a strong suspicion they modeled it on a specific Mercury ad from earlier in the year.

< https://gamehistory.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/image10.png>

Detail of a 1971 Mercury Cougar ad from late 1970.

Unfortunately, it looks like Nutting lost their graphic designer between 1968 and 1971. The front of the *Computer Space* ad has the most baffling and arbitrarily placed text I've ever seen on a flyer. It almost requires a strange sort of skill to make Helvetica look bad, but they figured it out.

There are also subtle problems with the photograph itself. If you look closely at the model, her head and shoulder are blurry. She was probably still settling into her next pose when they snapped that one, and either didn't notice or didn't care enough to select a different shot. Or maybe they liked how, if you look closely, you can see the model's underwear through her too-sheer gown.

While we're looking closely, note that the screen area of the cabinet is a darker black than the background. This might've been a last minute to cover up a game screen that hadn't photographed well?

< https://gamehistory.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/image5.png>

Left to Right: Flyer Fever, Arcade Flyer Archive, Flippers.com, VGHF.

Also, the image wasn't properly color corrected. It's so bad, it seems like scanners with auto-color enabled want to shift the hue to a yellow-orange, so the model's skin looks a little less like a Simpsons character. Or maybe the color is being shifted manually by the uploader, to give it a more natural look. Either way, it seems like half of the *Computer Space* flyer images on the internet have more of an orange-yellow hue, while the other half look pure yellow like the one Frank Cifaldi scanned in for this article.

Another issue that makes the flyer tricky to scan is that the paper has a canvas-like texture to it that can look like dust or cracks when scanned. I wonder if the texture meant to make it seem like art?

Let's just say there's a strong "ambitious amateur" vibe to the flyer, and the lack of quality control extends to the back. While the layout of the back at least looks competent, they made a mistake with the photographs and

featured a cabinet with completely different set of player controls than the front!

Front Control Panel

<https://gamehistory.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/image11.png>
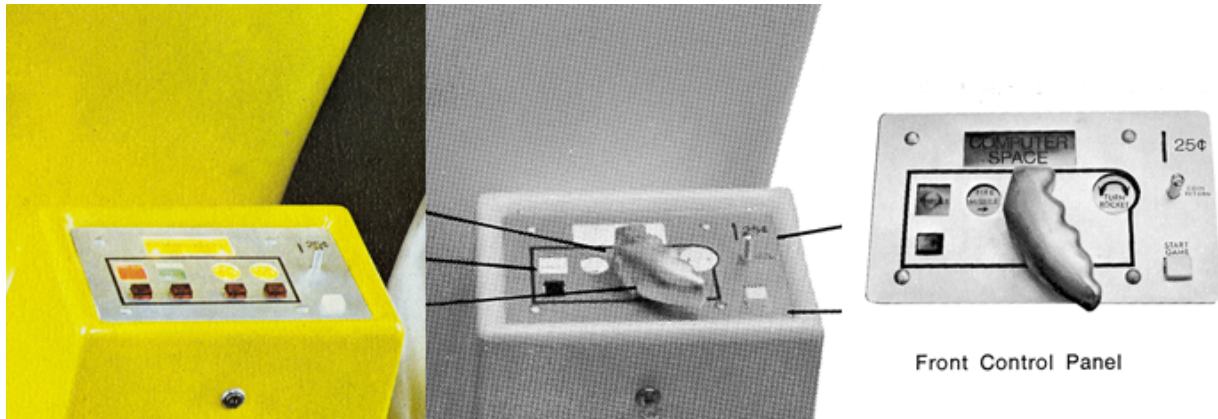
Syzygy briefly tried out this rotating lever during location tests after noticing in location that some players were struggling with the concept of using buttons to rotate the ship, but it didn't last the night before breaking.My question is how such a short-lived configuration made it onto the back of the flyer, when there was obviously a photo-shoot for the front that used the button controls. It's a mystery.The other interesting thing about the back of the flyer is what it doesn't say. The term "video game" didn't exist yet, and they made no attempt at coming up with a word themselves. The flyer only refers to *Computer Space* as a "cabinet" or a "unit."The language is similarly dry when discussing the TV set itself, focusing purely on the practical aspects. There are "no mechanical relays, films or belts" that might break on you, with "solid-state construction" that will give you "the ultimate in long life." It even uses electro-mechanical arcade language when describing the screen itself as a "back-lit play-field"Was Nutting simply struggling for the language to properly describe it? Or were they purposely downplaying the screen because a black and white TV set wasn't as visually exciting as the color cars projected in *Speedway* < https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ao8-I8tWtTw> and its clones? You almost had to see *Computer Space* in action to really understand how differently it played from electro-mechanical games. The best the flyer could manage was "no repeating sequence."

< https://gamehistory.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/image4.png>

Computer Space ad from Cash Box (Nov 27, 1971).

As with *Computer Quiz*, Nutting ran magazine ads for *Computer Space* in Cash Box. The text boldly criticized the arcade industry's tendency to imitate existing concepts rather than innovate new ones. The irony.

The ad used an alternate shot from the flyer photo-shoot. Did they notice the blurriness, or just want to change things up? Either way, quality control problems struck again in the ad's first appearance. Somehow they managed to set the type at a slight diagonal in relation to the border. There are also some white specks that I initially thought were printing anomalies, but after comparing several different scans of this page, the same specks appeared in every copy of this issue. You might also notice the bottom edge of the ad has a "bump" where the photograph meets the black rectangle the text is set in.

It's a real shame, too, because this is an important piece of video game history, and they obviously didn't realize it at the time. This is the very first magazine ad for a video game, ever.

But there's one caveat. It wasn't the first magazine ad aimed at actual video game consumers. That distinction goes to the first home video game.

[Continued in Part 2. < https://gamehistory.org/magnavox-odyssey-advertisement-history/>]

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Additional Sources: Arcade Flyer Archive < https://flyers.arcade-museum.com/> , Atari History Timelines < http://mcurrent.name/atarihistory/syzygy.html> by Michael Current, *Atari Inc.: Business Is Fun* by Marty Goldberg and Curt Vendel, FlyerFever.com < https://www.flyerfever.com/> , PinRepair.com < http://www.pinrepair.com/> , They Create Worlds < https://videogamehistorian.wordpress.com/> by Alex Smith, *Think Small* by Frank Rowsome, Jr., *Videogames: In The Beginning* by Ralph H. Baer.

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PIXELS IN PRINT (PART 2): ADVERTISING ODYSSEY – THE FIRST HOME VIDEO GAME

How do you explain home video games to someone who has never seen an arcade cabinet, or even a VCR?

By Kate Willaert < https://gamehistory.org/author/kwillaert/>

March 20, 2020 < https://gamehistory.org/magnavox-odyssey-advertisement-history/>

we looked at the very first attempt to market a video game. But where that one was targeted at arcade operators, advertising directly to consumers would require a different approach. How do you market a home console to a world that's never even used a VCR?

This is the story of Odyssey.

Creating The First Home Video Game

In 1966, a designer of military electronics had a revolutionary idea: what if people could interact with their home television set?

Ralph Baer began tinkering with the idea in secret at work, at one point even borrowing a spare technician to help him flesh out a proof-of-concept. When he finally showed his bosses at Sanders Associates what he'd been working on, they naturally fired him on the spot.

I'm kidding. They were impressed and approved the project.

The only problem is that Baer was having trouble coming up with fun game concepts to play on his device. Unlike Nolan Bushnell at Nutting Associates, Baer was completely unaware of computer games like *Spacewar!*. And besides, Baer was trying to keep it simple. Rather than showcasing a powerful computer, he was trying to develop something that would be affordable at a consumer level.

His initial ideas involved simple actions, like mashing a button to cause a flat color to rise from the bottom and fill the screen. If an overlay of a burning house was placed on the screen, the flat color could represent water that "fills up" holes cut into the overlay.

< https://gamehistory.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/image15.png>

Pumping Game prototype overlay from 1967.

"Pumping" games continue to show up today as mini-games, but could you imagine playing only variations on that concept over and over?

Ralph Baer recruited an engineer named Bill Rusch for some additional brainstorming sessions, which resulted in a number of concepts that revolved around using controllers to move two dots around on the screen. If a board

game overlay was placed on the TV, the two dots could function as game pieces. Or, the dots could chase each other and play tag. These ideas were more promising, but there was still a general concern about replay value.

When Bill Rusch was brought on as an official member of the team, he had an idea that would be a literal game-changer:

What if they added a third dot that wasn't controlled by either player, that could be hit around by the other two dots, like a game of ping pong?

Ralph Baer and Bill Harrison Play Ping-P...
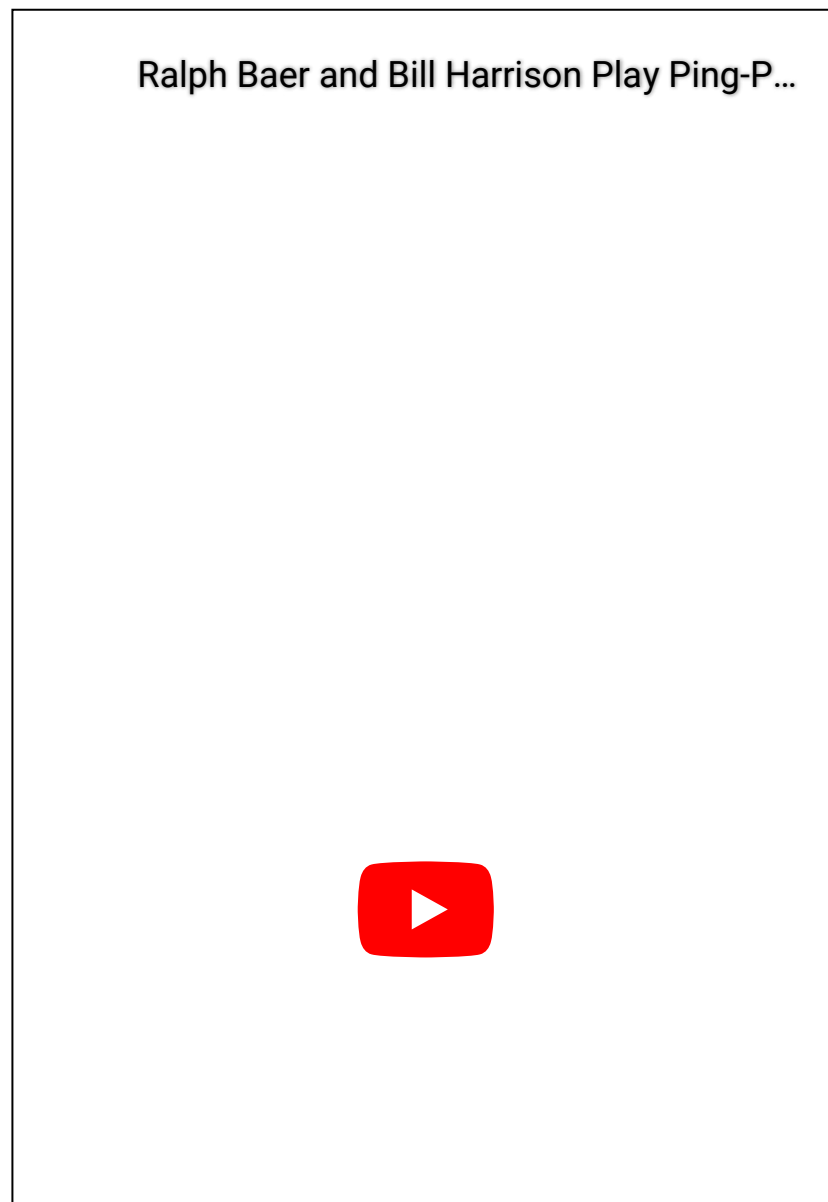
ng in 1969.

navox to produce a
covered *Spacewar!*. Baer
for-profit video game
machine, and neither of them knew it.

Unfortunately for Ralph Baer, negotiations with Magnavox took just a little too long, and Nolan Bushell was able to beat them to market by about a year. But Baer and Magnavox were still the first to bring video games into the *home*.
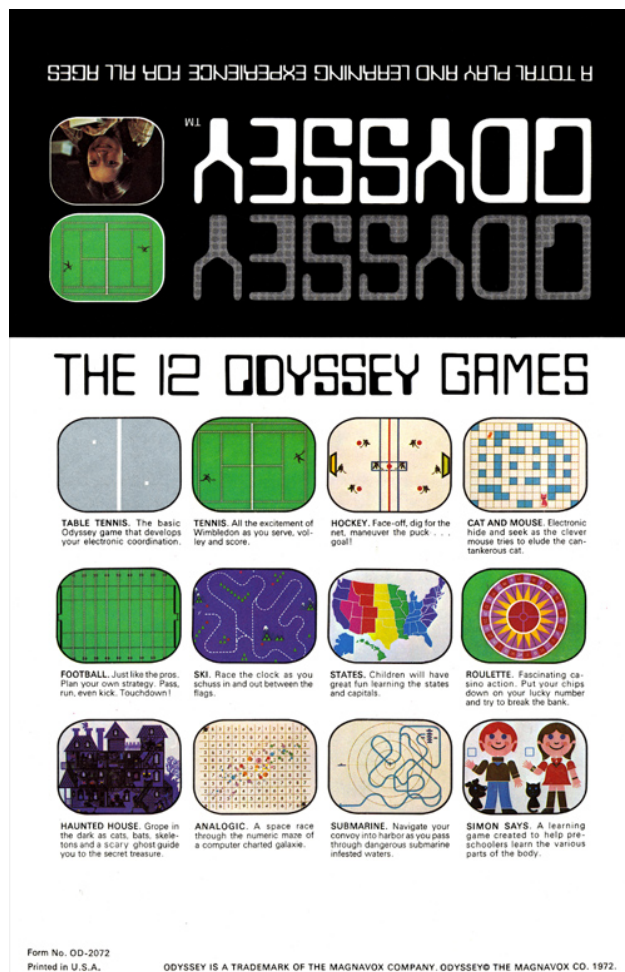
Launching The First Home Video Game

Magnavox launched the finished product in the fall of 1972, naming it Odyssey, perhaps in reference to the recent sci-fi film *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

Although it's tempting to call it "The Odyssey" or "Magnavox Odyssey," marketing materials always called it simply: "Odyssey."
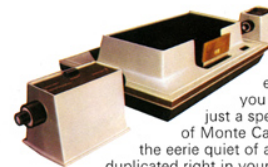
Odyssey came packaged with twelve different game modes, most of which were essentially just board games that used your TV as the board. But the main attraction was clearly ping pong, with the first three game modes being just variations on that, called *Table Tennis*, *Tennis*, and *Hockey*.

But what do you call a video game console when the term "video game" isn't yet a thing? Magnavox's first brochure provided a number of options:

- An electronic game simulator
- A closed circuit electronic playground
- A total play and learning experience
- The electronic game of the future

< https://gamehistory.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/image20.png>

Odyssey launch brochure front (left) and back (right) from 1972.

The first brochure was likely printed before the box art was finalized, because most of the screenshots are early prototype versions, similar to the ones that made it into the first commercial < https://gamehistory.org/first-video-game-commercial/> .

Some of these prototype images did make it onto the final packaging, such as *Tennis*, *Hockey* and *Cat And Mouse*. But the brochure features additional prototypes, most noticeably *Roulette*, but also *Analogic*, and *Submarine*.

Just how early was the brochure released? Was it available during Magnavox's touring trade show, where they demonstrated Odyssey the summer before launch?

I suspect it might've been, because a second brochure was printed the same year that's much more in line with the box art.

< https://gamehistory.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/image5.png>

`Odyssey brochure front (left), spread (center), and back (right) from Fall 1972.`

This brochure used updated art for *Roulette* and *Analogic*, and added screenshots of the Shooting Gallery games.

Strangely, the title for the "Optional Odyssey Shooting Gallery" doesn't match the style of the other titles. In the first brochure, the designer did the titles in a custom-made non-bold variation on Odyssey's logo type.

Odyssey's logo was based on a font called Moore Computer, which we would've called a "typeface" back then, but language evolves and now we call them fonts. Live with it.

According to [Fonts In Use < https://fontsinuse.com/typefaces/7324/computer>](https://fontsinuse.com/typefaces/7324/computer), Moore Computer was designed in 1968 by James H. Moore, and was later digitized under the name Computer, but good luck searching the internet for "Computer font."

But who was responsible for the obscure non-bold variation, which has never been digitized? The packaging was created by Bradford/Cout Design, but I've analyzed both of their styles and I'm still not positive whether it was Ron Bradford or Al Cout. Bradford definitely designed all the overlays and game pieces, but it's unclear whether he did the box itself.

The custom-made font was used on all the initial design materials, such as the Odyssey box and the boxes for the first wave of games, and then never appeared again.

Odyssey's logo, on the other hand, continued to get quite a workout.

<https://gamehistory.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/image19.png>
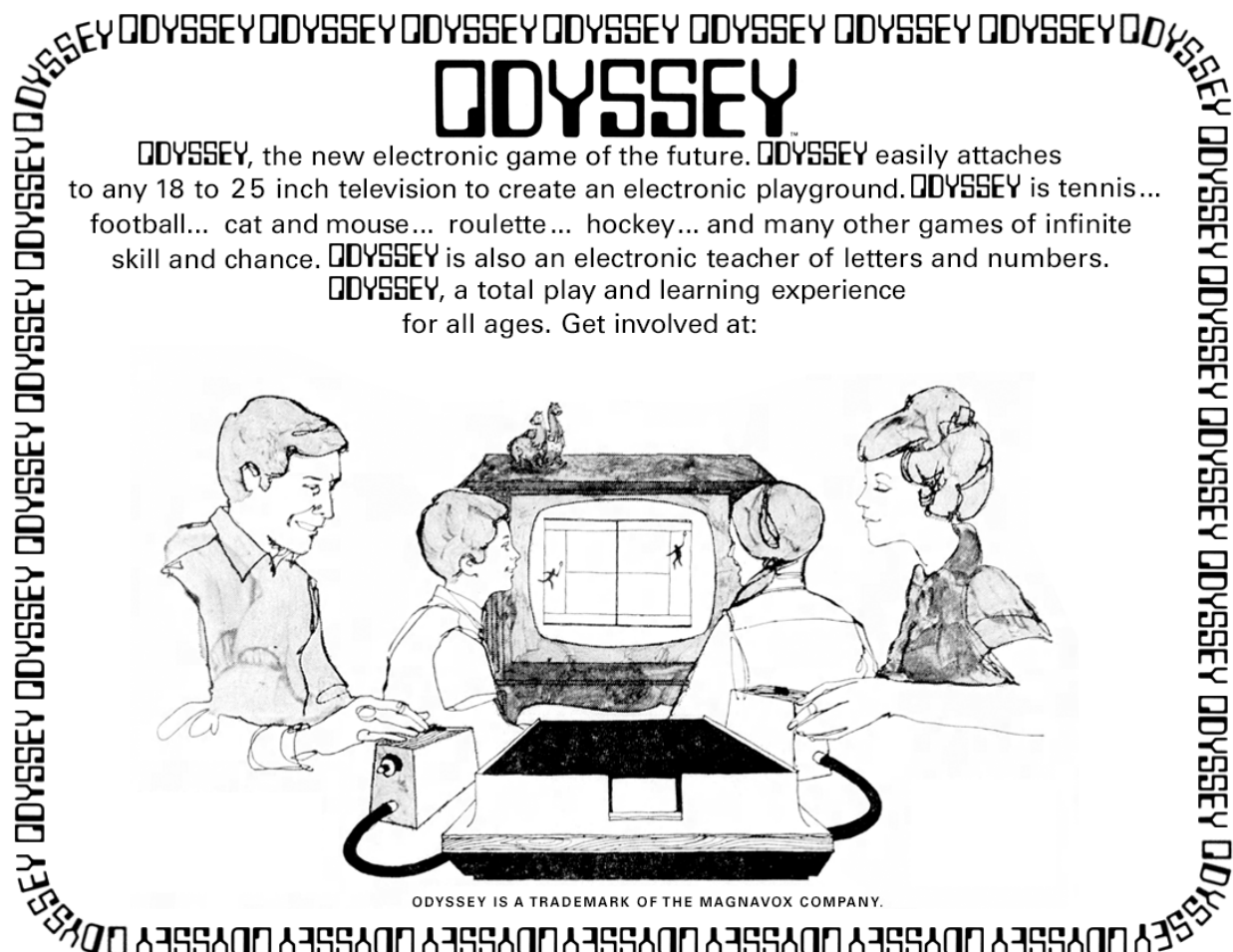
Odyssey newspaper ads came in two basic shapes: short rectangle and tall rectangle. They might not look like much, but these are the first ads ever created for a home video game console.

Or were they the first video game ads, period? Although the ads for Computer Space < https://gamehistory.org/first-arcade-game-advertisement-computer-space/> appeared a year earlier, they were only seen by industry insiders. The Odyssey ads, on the other hand, were the first to be seen by actual consumers.

Either way, the marketing approach between the two couldn't be any different. Where *Computer Space* went with "sex sells," Odyssey is very "fun for the whole family."

On the other hand, one thing they do share in common is that neither were directly marketing to kids. Just as Nutting was targeting arcade operators, Magnavox was selling to primarily to parents. Hence the focus on Odyssey being educational.

< https://gamehistory.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/image4.png>

Odyssey newspaper templates
from Fall 1972.

But they also wanted to emphasize that this wasn't just for kids — it was fun for adults, too!

The illustration looks like it was loosely based on the brochure photo and the shot at the end of the first commercial. Or was it the illustration that came first? Either way, there's one important difference: in the illustration, the parents are the ones reaching for the controllers. This mirrors the

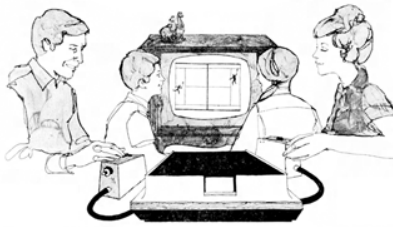early [Odyssey TV commercials < https://gamehistory.org/first-video-game-commercial/>](https://gamehistory.org/first-video-game-commercial/) which showed the parents playing more than the kids.

And it's not hard to imagine why Magnavox would take this approach. $100 was a lot of money in 1972 (about $600 in 2019 dollars), and parents might be reluctant to spend so much on a mere toy, even if it was educational. But a fun gadget that adults can enjoy? That's another story.

The only catch was that you had to live in a city that had a Magnavox dealer, because they were the only ones allowed to sell Odyssey, even though other Magnavox products could be bought at department stores. This exclusivity may be what led some consumers to believe Odyssey was only compatible with Magnavox televisions.

This exclusivity also meant that fewer people at the time even heard of Odyssey, because the ads were only run on a regional basis. Dealers were typically responsible for taking out the ads themselves, with template art supplied by Magnavox.

< https://gamehistory.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/image17.png>

Examples of modified ad placements from Fall 1972.

But the art wasn't always printed exactly as sent. Since the space reserved for the dealer's store info was so small, those who didn't just put their info underneath the ad would sometimes chop it up, or rearrange it to make it fit a different shape.

I feel kind of bad for whoever had to create that border, going to all that pre-computer effort only for someone to potentially throw it away. I hope it was a labor of love and not a directive from above. Repetition can be effective, but it's called the rule of three, not the rule of thirty, Bob.
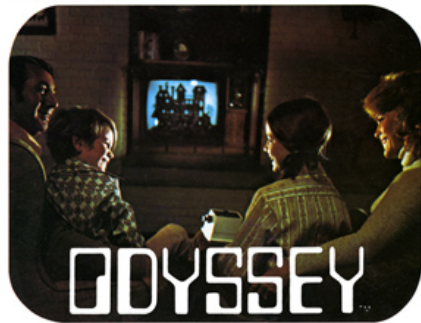
Post-Launch 1973

Odyssey's launch didn't go quite as planned. Magnavox had projected holiday sales of 50,000 units, and ended up selling 69,000 units. Which is great, right?!
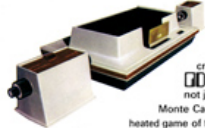
Except an enthusiastic Odyssey advocate in marketing had convinced the company to manufacture more than twice as many units as the projected amount. Now that overstock was taking up warehouse space, making Odyssey look like a flop instead of a runaway success.

But dealers were consistently selling through their orders and wanted more. This must've given Magnavox just enough confidence to not discount Odyssey during their big Annual Sale.

< https://gamehistory.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/image7.png>

Odyssey spread in "Factory-Sponsored Annual Magnavox Sale" catalog from January 1973.

The first catalog ad for a video game was this double-page spread in the Annual Sale catalog for January 1973.

Every year, Magnavox put together two big catalogs: a pre-holiday catalog in the fall, and the Annual Sale catalog in January. These were available in-store in glossy form, but were also sometimes printed on lower-quality paper as a newspaper insert.

Why did Odyssey first appear in the Annual Sale catalog rather than the Fall 1972 catalog? Magnavox was limiting how many dealers would even get shipments of Odyssey that season, so that's probably why. But I imagine with

all that warehouse backstock post-Christmas, they must've opened the floodgates right away in January.

My favorite thing about this spread that it reminds me of video game catalog spreads from the '80s and '90s. Back then, Sears and JCPenney would fill pages with rows of screenshots instead of box art. I never imagined the trend started way back in 1973, but it makes sense. What better way to quickly get across that Odyssey played a wide variety of games?

But one thing that bugs me is that the logo is wrong. It's so subtle you probably didn't even notice, but take a look at the uppercase "O."

In the official logo, the thick portion of the "O" was lowered to line up with the thick portion of the "S." But somehow, the original "O" snuck in!

And it's not just once. Odyssey's logo appears thirteen times, and the wrong "O" is used every time. Did the catalog designer not have the logo on hand, and decided it'd be faster to just typeset it from scratch?

Christmas 1973

Odyssey had a strong Christmas in 1973. Not only did they sell through all that warehouse stock, they also manufactured 27,000 additional units, for a total of 89,000 units sold — better than the previous year!

But Magnavox itself wasn't doing so well. They began 1973 with a disappointing earnings report just as the stock exchange was entering <u>one of</u>

[the ten worst bear markets in history < https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1973%E2%80%9374_stock_market_crash>](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1973%E2%80%9374_stock_market_crash). Magnavox stock that was as high as $39 in mid-1972 was already down to $17 by February 1973.

That same month, Magnavox brought in Alfred Di Scipio as their new President of the Consumer Electronics Group at Magnavox, who immediately proceeded to shake things up. One of his big marketing initiatives was a Magnavox-sponsored [Sinatra TV special < https://gamehistory.org/first-video-game-commercial/>](https://gamehistory.org/first-video-game-commercial/) for Fall 1973 that showcased a variety of Magnavox products, including Odyssey.

Fall 1973 also saw a makeover to Odyssey's print assets. This included a new, less-spooky family photo, and a new product descriptor: no longer merely an "electronic game," Odyssey was an entire "electronic game *center.*"

[< https://gamehistory.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/image2.png>](https://gamehistory.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/image2.png)

`Odyssey three-page section in "High Reliability Television" catalog from Fall 1973.`

Odyssey took up three pages in the Fall 1973 catalog, with a spread that showed *literally everything*. The four new optional games, bringing to total to ten. The optional carrying case. Even the AC power supply!

And that's not all; they also displayed all the little game pieces next to their corresponding overlays, to make it extra clear what you were getting.

< https://gamehistory.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/image6.png>

Odyssey tri-fold brochure outside (top) and inside (bottom) from 1974.

Afterwards, a revised brochure was released that contained most of the same information. The images were larger, of course. But there's also a small addition so subtle you might not notice.

In the big block of text under the words "This Is Odyssey," there's a tiny little illustration of a ball-and-paddle game trying to draw your attention to the sentence about "electronic tennis."

Ball-and-paddle games were heating up at the arcades, so it made sense to call that out. But at the same time, why so subtle?

< https://gamehistory.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/image14.png>

Odyssey newspaper ad from Fall 1973.

The Fall makeover extended into the newspaper ads, with a new family illustration loosely based on the new family photo. Strangely, the illustration replaced *Hockey* with *States*. Did they feel newspaper readers would be more engaged by the educational angle?

I'm not sure why the half-off deal featured here wasn't mentioned in the catalog ad, unless not all dealers were participating in the deal? But one one small item that did appear in both ads was the *Parents Magazine* Guaranteed Seal. It's that little graphic in the lower right corner.

The Guaranteed Seal indicated that *Parents Magazine* had personally tested the product and were so confident in its quality that they were willing to offer 30 day return policy.

The Guaranteed Seal was inspired by *Good Housekeeping*'s Seal Of Approval, possibly the most recognizable trust symbol of the 20th century, and likely a direct ancestor to Nintendo's Seal Of Quality.

The Seal of Approval was originally established in 1909 to help combat unsafe products. Before a product could be advertised in *Good Housekeeping*, it had to be tested in-house. As a bonus, any product that passed the test could include the seal on ads outside of the magazine.

Parents Magazine worked the same way, which meant Magnavox took out a magazine ad. And here it is:

< https://gamehistory.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/image9.png>
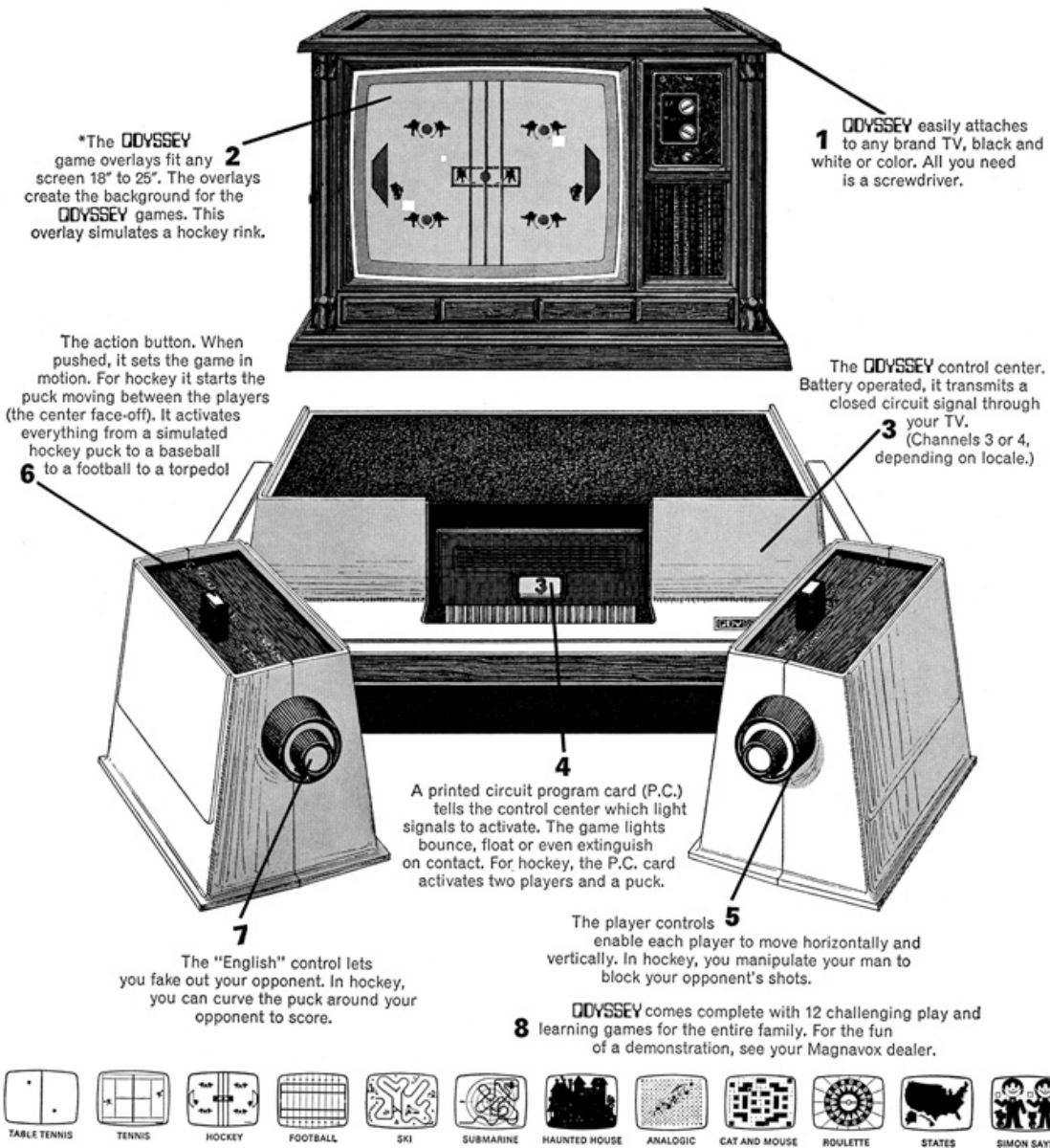
Odyssey ad from Parents Magazine (Nov 1973).

The first full-page magazine ad for a home video game.

I'd say it was a pretty bold move advertising in a national publication when the product was only available in cities with Magnavox dealers, but the Sinatra special was far more bold. Magnavox hoped that the uniqueness of the product would convince people to seek out their nearest Magnavox dealer.

I love that the first magazine ad was essentially a "for dummies" explainer for adults. They knew that no kids were reading *Parents Magazine*, so the focus was less on fun than functionality.

But in trying to explain how simple it was, did they make it even more complicated? At the very least they could've arranged the numbers in a clockwise pattern, rather than zig-zagging all over the place.

In another strange design gaff, they "smooshed" the logo! This happens all the time in the computer age, because a thoughtless amateur can just grab a corner and stretch it as much as they want, but back then it took a little more effort to break common branding rules.

Christmas 1974

1974 was Odyssey's best year yet, breaking the 100k barrier with 129,000 units sold!

But it was a rough year for Magnavox as a company. It were forced to delay its Annual Sale to March, though Di Scipio claimed it was due to the Sinatra special creating "unprecedented demand" that overwhelmed them with orders.

They didn't even print a catalog for Annual Sale '74, which is disappointing because generic dealer ads indicate Odyssey was on sale for the clever price of $74.74.

Meanwhile, Magnavox stock continued to plummet. The Fall 1974 season began with Philips initiating a hostile takeover, gaining a majority stake in

October 1974 and complete ownership by July 1975.

< https://gamehistory.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/image3.jpg>

Left: Odyssey spread in "Magnificent Gifts From Magnavox" catalog from Fall 1974, Right: Odyssey ad in "Magnavox Double Star Savings" catalog from January 1975.

The catalog ads that year simply reused the assets from 1973, but what's most notable this time is what's *not* featured. The four newest game releases are gone, and the ones that remain are literally being given away. Magnavox clearly lost interest in the extras.

Ralph Baer believed the additional games didn't sell because they were apparently hidden under the store counter, for staff to upsell customers who were purchasing a console. If true, that would make it impossible to sell new games to someone who already owned Odyssey.

But what if there was simply much more interest in the ball-and-paddle game? The additional packs were little more than glorified board games < https://www.acriticalhit.com/best-box-art-part-1-magnavox-odyssey/> , offering additional overlays and game pieces to game modes already built into the console.

Maybe Magnavox saw the writing on the wall, which would explain the direction they went with the first Odyssey sequels — but we'll get to those another time. Magnavox wasn't finished with the core console just yet.

< https://gamehistory.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/image21.png>

Odyssey ad from Sears Wish Book (Christmas 1974)

In a shocking move, Magnavox allowed their once-exclusive console to be sold by mail in the *Sears Wish Book*!

Naturally, this wasn't something Magnavox pursued, but rather were talked into. Tom Quinn was a buyer at Sears who was fascinated with video games. He was in charge of sporting goods, but he justified going after Odyssey because it included sports games.

But he couldn't convince them to allow Sears to sell Odyssey in their stores.

< https://gamehistory.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/image12.png>

Left: Ad from Parents Magazine (Nov 1974), Right: Ad from Reader's Digest (Dec 1974).

Magnavox also produced a new magazine ad for *Parents Magazine*, and then ran in a reworked form in *Reader's Digest*. That they were targeting magazines

primarily read by moms I think says something about who they felt had most of the buying power at Christmas.

I imagine it must've been a constant headache figuring out which two of the four basic family members should be playing in any particular ad. How do you suggest a gift for the kids, but that adults can enjoy it too?

Here they've apparently given up and decided all four should be playing. If you don't know how Odyssey works, basically they've got two people controlling vertical movement, and their partners controlling horizontal movement. Which is a great idea if you want to get everybody arguing. On the other hand, there are modern hits like *Overcooked*.

I've been trying to generate theories on why the ad was reworked for *Reader's Digest*. The page dimensions of that magazine were much smaller, but it doesn't look like they actually increased the text size. It ran in the Gift Guide section of the issue, so that at least explains the change from "Get Odyssey" to "Give Odyssey."

But there are two things I love about the first version that get lost in the second.

First, that killer headline. It's based on an idea that goes all the back to the very first brochure ("With Odyssey you participate in television, you're not just a spectator"), but it was never said better than right here. It's so good that even the garbage subhead underneath barely injures it.

Second, the bold move to open the body text with a shocking statistic about the trouble with television, only to turn it around in the very next paragraph. This was a common strategy used in Volkswagen ads — though usually

augmented with humor — which brings us full circle with [Computer Space and the inescapable influence of car ads < https://gamehistory.org/first-arcade-game-advertisement-computer-space/>](https://gamehistory.org/first-arcade-game-advertisement-computer-space/) .

The Flop Fallacy

There's a common misconception that *Computer Space* and Odyssey were flops. Failures. Fiascos. None of this is true.

I'd hesitate to even call them "commercial disappointments." Both machines sold a reasonable number of units for the times, they just weren't the culture-defining hits they *could've* been.

What held them back? In the case of *Computer Space*, the game was just a little too complicated to be someone's first introduction to the concept of video games. College kids enjoyed figuring the game out, but bar patrons wanted something a little more pick-up-and-play.

The legend goes that the game was so complicated that no one wanted anything to do with it, but that's simply not true. Nutting Associates manufactured around 1,500 at a time when that was an above average amount, and sold most or all of them.

If they hadn't, they wouldn't have made a sequel.

< https://gamehistory.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/image1.png>

Computer Space flyer from 1973 (front and back).

With an actual logo this time! And I guess Nutting decided sex was no longer selling, because he decided to replace the risque models with the game's theoretical target demographic: teenage boys and girls.

Magnavox's launch was more complicated. They beat their projected numbers, but produced way too many, which looked like a flop on paper. But then they sold through all the overstock and produced another run, beating the first year's sales. And then the third year they beat the second year's sales.

So why do these get labeled as flops?

It's partly down to the initial overorders, of course. But also, it's like we have this kneejerk desire to declare something a flop if something isn't a hit — or sometimes isn't *enough* of a hit.

Maybe we even believe that if something becomes obscure and forgotten, it's a sign that it was a flop. But the truth is, we only ever remember the hits. After all, when we see a ball-and-paddle game today, we don't call it "Odyssey" or "Table Tennis."

We call it *Pong*.

[Continued in Part 3.]

Additional Sources: Billboard < https://books.google.com/books?id=CgkEAAAAMBAJ&pg=PA47&lpg=PA47&dq=magnavox+annual+sale+delayed&source=bl&ots=Qz1QZYyaWY&sig=ACfU3U1by3T4sqRBj_89V5MIzwnaIUn09Q&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwirqtaV1YTnAhVEnp4KHQ9fDtYQ6AEwAHoECAgQAQ#v=onepage&q=magnavox%20annual%20sale%20delayed&f=false> , Cash Box < https://archive.org/details/cashbox34unse_34/page/n31/mode/2up> , FlyerFever.com < https://www.flyerfever.com/> , GoodHousekeeping.com < https://www.goodhousekeeping.com/institute/about-the-institute/a17940/good-housekeeping-institute-timeline/> , Hearings < https://books.google.com/books?id=u10aAAAAIAAJ&lpg=PA49&ots=ppwcfKmcwa&dq=%22parents%20magazine%22%20seal&pg=PA49#v=onepage&q=%22parents%20magazine%22%20seal&f=false> by the United States National Commission On Product Safety, New York Times (1 < https://www.nytimes.com/1972/05/11/archives/stocks-recover-as-trading-dips-sharp-reversal-of-tuesday-plunge.html> , 2 < https://www.nytimes.com/1972/12/05/archives/dow-average-rises-by-309-points-trading-heavy-bigboard-index-sets-a.html> , 3 < https://www.nytimes.com/1973/02/23/archives/stock-market-declines-as-

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Kate Willaert collects video game history in her [monthly newsletter < https://criticalkate.substack.com/>](https://criticalkate.substack.com/) .

Why in North Dakota is Carmen Sandiego?

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