
How Gaming Conquered the World

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For many, the 70s marked the beginnings of the true modern phenomenon that is broadcast television. In 1976 South Africans gathered around these boxy units with fiddly buttons and bunny ear aerials waiting to be amazed, and they would not be disappointed. The picture was colour and it came with sound, and included so much more. A mere four years after its launch on 21 November 1980, broadcast television had already offered one of the most puzzling questions to face South Africans in years: Who shot JR Ewing? Our addiction was in full swing and discussions around the water cooler would never be the same again.

With far less fanfare, the first video game compatible with these televisions was launched in 1972. While the name “Pong” may not fire up the memory cells quite as much as the fate of a fictional oil baron, the visual of two white lines bouncing a ball between each other has probably been seen at one time or another. To be honest, with the way that the video game industry has progressed, it does seem harder and harder to credibly justify why everyone found Pong so engaging. With each iteration, video games boast greater realism and an ever-increasing mix of real-world and created culture to become truly immersed in. It is fair to say that the early days of televisual table tennis have lost their sheen to all but the most die-hard of fans. I mean, it sounded nothing like table tennis, there were no crowds cheering every successful return, and your straight white line didn’t have a backstory or a special super move.

As tempting as it is to list the many iterations of video gaming that have passed since we put down the paddles and gave up on our ping pong careers, it would also relegate this article to the narrow audience of true gaming enthusiasts. For this reason, I have chosen to detour around the heady days of Pac-Man and Donkey Kong. I will skip past the ZX Spectrum and the mighty Commodore 64, and tear past the era when Atari and Intellivision boggled the imagination through blocky graphics and very poor ringtone sound effects. Hopefully, the mere mention of some of the greats that have come before will at least pay some homage to the very real pioneers of the field. I think even Elon Musk’s first really audacious piece of work was to write a computer game at a tender age. It now seems unlikely that the game will be the project he is best remembered for. In fact, if the majority of this paragraph (with the exception of Mr Musk) seems like it could be a list of gobbledygook made up by a fevered mind, don’t feel bad. One of the most striking facts about the rise of video gaming is that it seems to have almost crept up on many of us.

While Hollywood films still arrive with a great deal of pomp and fanfare, as does the latest album by whoever is topping the charts at the moment, by and large, video games historically have not garnered the same type of frenzy. That is to say, they didn’t, but this too is rapidly changing. In 2013, the release of Grand Theft Auto V gave us a remarkable reality check about the power of the video game, as it quickly became the best-selling disc of all time – selling 150 million copies. In 2016, Modern Warfare was released with a full premier worthy of any blockbuster film, with the game’s main antagonist, played by Kevin Spacey (before a subsequent fall from grace), treading the red carpet at a gala event in London. The response from Hollywood has been fairly predictable: can we make a film out of it? Tomb Raider was brought to life by Angelina Jolie in one of the first of many adaptations now moving from the small screen to the silver screen as gaming continues to ascend to the top of the entertainment pyramid.

While to some the references may seem anecdotal, or simply spikes that fall outside of the norm, the Video Game industry in 2021 has the type of hard data behind it that cannot be argued by even the most ardent naysayer. Recent estimates put the number of active gamers at over 2 billion – a quarter of the world’s population. The category has grown to dwarf both the film and music industries combined. Whilst 2020 may have proven to be a year to forget for both people and businesses alike, that would not include the gaming industry. It achieved sales of \$155 billion. Analysts believe this figure will increase to \$260 billion by 2025. As staggering as these estimates may seem, it is important to consider the major global tech players who are now rapidly seeking a way to meaningfully feature in this category. Apple, Facebook, and even Google do not have a current stake in this market and are now committing their vast resources to rectify this.

The final word must surely go to Generation Z (or Gen Z to their admirers), a group of people who have now become more adept and comfortable in the digital world than the real one. This unique demographic is changing the world as we know it, but it is doing so virtually. After all, if something doesn't appear on Instagram did it even happen? As the allure of online personality and a digital world proves ever more compelling to new consumers, many companies are actively seeking ways to exert influence through gaming. Currently Games companies are standing firm on aspects of business such as brand presence and product placement, but then the same could have been said of social media platforms at one point (certainly hard to remember now). As consistent progress is sought in VR (virtual reality) and AR (augmented reality) it is becoming unmistakably clear that gaming will provide the new frontier for such technology. In many ways, the age of gaming has only just begun.