

Regulating the Desire Machine: *Custer's Revenge* and 8-Bit Atari Porn Video Games

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Abstract

Exploring the short and largely forgotten history of adult-oriented 8-bit video games produced for the Atari 2600 home game console, this essay argues that the games represent an important attempt by media producers to bridge the adult film and interactive entertainment industries. Although American Multiple Industries, Playaround, and Universal Gamex failed to establish a market, their titles nevertheless demonstrate how adult games function as desire machines within an erotic economy that sells a host of anticipatory pleasures. Indeed, the resulting public outcry not only led to the game industry's first sex-based controversy, but the antagonism signals the desire to regulate sexual expression on a new media technology as game producers—following the lead of adult video professionals—attempted to transport users' joysticks from living rooms into bedrooms.

Keywords

video games, Atari, pornography, regulation, moral panic, *Custer's Revenge*

Will Custer have his sweet revenge? Or will he get it in the end?

—Game box copy, *Custer's Revenge* (1982)

When it appears as more than a passing footnote in popular video game histories, the story of *Custer's Revenge* (1982) is often presented as a cautionary tale about a young industry behaving badly.¹ Produced for the Atari 2600 home video game console by

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American Multiple Industries (AMI), *Custer's Revenge* was remarkably simple in its design: one plays as the pixelated titular general who, sporting little more than a waving bandanna and an erection, scores points for dodging arrows while approaching a naked Native American woman tied to a cactus (Figure 2). According to the game's promotional literature, upon his successful arrival at the cactus, Custer "evens up an old score," which is to say he rapes the woman, gaining more points with each thrust ("The Brouhaha over X-Rated Video Games" 1982, 145). Not surprisingly, given this conceit, the game quickly became emblematic of the immaturity, violence, and misogyny that detractors saw lurking within video games—especially as it unfolded just as a minor panic erupted about video games being hazardous to children. The deluge of negative press that accompanied *Custer's Revenge* even before its official release, stemming from protests by Native American and feminist groups, became the industry's first sex-based controversy. Nevertheless, the brief, mostly forgotten story of *Custer's Revenge* and the other 8-bit² adult-oriented games—those developed by AMI, its successor Playaround, and one title by Universal Gamex—remains marginal in media history.

These games, and their brief occupation of the national consciousness, are more than novelties; however, their history—as taboo media objects and as political flash-points—reveals the basic, erotic economy underlying *all* video games, or as Tanya Krzywinska (2012, 158) calls them, "desire machines." To be clear, these games were neither sexual aids nor were they "erotic" in any obvious sense. They existed in a curious space in which they did not necessarily function in the same ways as more traditional pornography. For instance, they did not possess realistic graphics, nor did they offer gameplay mechanics facilitating "haptic inattention" to free gamers' hands for masturbation or sexual behavior with others (Ruggill 2004), in the way adult films played back on VCRs permitted. There were likewise no immersive erotic narratives (as there were in some text-based multi-user games), or complex game systems transforming lust into quantifiable and manageable resources (Brathwaite 2006). Instead, these games presented crudely "sexualized" arcade mechanics largely derivative from extant titles, reconfigured to add salacious elements that might appeal to adult audiences curious about the potential of video games to deliver pornographic content.

This raises significant questions about pornography itself and what makes something "pornographic" in the first place. As Susanna Paasonen (2011, 80) describes, "pornography sports the 'authentic presence' of arousal and orgasm with the aid of the documentary powers of photography and cinematography by promising to convey indexical traces of the events that have taken place." In the case of these 8-bit games, there were no indexical traces, no "authentic presences," and certainly no documentary renditions of anything resembling "reality." There were only pixels, moving around screens, vaguely gesturing toward juvenile associations and connotations with sex. Such suggestions were not only aggressively marketed by the games' creators but also seized upon by those seeking to regulate their dissemination, rendering the need for "authenticity" somewhat moot. Ultimately, the graphically abstract rendering of the games gave them a polysemic quality, allowing them to sustain readings and dissimilar interpretations fueling debates ranging from what makes for good game design to what constitutes free speech.

This essay returns to late 1982 to examine the production and distribution histories of *Custer's Revenge* and the short run of 8-bit games, highlighting how these titles became overdetermined taboo objects that functioned less as desire machines than as controversy machines. As Eric Freedman (2007) writes,

Atari's origin story is often written as a series of annual reports, tracing the company's financial demise—a tale of changing ownership and managerial missteps; but the more interesting tale is found in the deceptively simple narratives that played out on its consoles in family rooms across the nation.

Moreover, the historical parallels between the adult film and video games industries' respective migrations from public to private spaces during this time remain striking. Consider the similarities: both forms of cultural production that had been publicly consumed and, in the case of arcade games (and some pornography), performed in the open view of others in (typically) seedy locales on a pay-to-play basis had successfully migrated from venues of ill-repute to the privacy of home television screens during roughly the same time period.

Ultimately, the cultural desires in the era to regulate sexual expression on emerging technologies, alongside the overwhelming failure by the games' producers to recognize their own missteps in terms of game design and public relations, sent these games into a rapid tailspin from which they never recovered. Rather than just the problematic and juvenile gameplay and narratives that have long defined these games, it is also the acts of regulation that make up their lasting legacy. As Walter Kendrick (1987, 235) argues, the history of pornography is characterized by “the urge to regulate the behavior of those who seem to threaten the social order.” The makers of these games certainly fit that description for those seeking to contain such threats. In the end, both the game designs and regulatory responses were complex and often contradictory, adhering to what Michel Foucault calls the “rule of the tactical polyvalence of discourses.” That is, they were neither, as Foucault describes, “uniform nor stable,” nor were they necessarily simplistically delineated. “There is not, on the one side,” he writes, “a discourse of power, and opposite it, another discourse that runs counter to it. Discourses are tactical elements or blocks operating in the field of force relations” (Foucault 1990, 100–102). The competing discourses surrounding the adult-oriented Atari games of the 1980s embody such interwoven strategies, and the ways in which social power circulated around the games remain important to capture a clear historical picture of their downfall. Indeed, *Custer's Revenge*, along with the other games, got it in the end—but not in the way their makers had hoped.

“We Want Them Laughing”: *Custer's* Origins

During the late 1970s and early 1980s, the U.S. public had fallen in love with video games; in 1978, sales reached \$454 million; by 1982, that figure had topped \$5 billion (Donovan 2010, 81). Atari's acquisition by Warner Communication in 1976 enabled the console giant to outlast its competition and enjoy vast market penetration during

the early 1980s. However, with the acquisition came a new, top-down focus on streamlining production (with an accompanying de-emphasis on tinkering) that resulted in a steady exodus of creative personnel. Four ex-Atari designers tired of not receiving any authorial recognition left to form Activision and began creating third-party Atari games. Atari/Warner subsequently sued Activision, and the companies settled out of court. But this precedent helped establish the current royalty system, and by 1982, a dozen-plus companies were producing Atari-compatible cartridges (Donovan 2010, 98). The video game industry was booming, and *Time* captured the moment in early January 1982 with a cover reading “Video Games Are Blitzing the World,” as new companies rushed in to seek out and capture part of the growing market share.

It was squarely into this terrain that AMI dropped *Custer's Revenge* and its other adult-oriented games. Freelance marketing consultant Stuart Kesten—a former marketing manager for Sterling Drug, Inc. and L’Oreal—and Joel Martin—whose background was in the toy manufacturing industry—created AMI in late 1981 in Northridge, California, to manufacture plastic storage cases for video and audio equipment (Marguiles 1982b, E1, E6). After all, with home video exploding in popularity, rental stores needed stockpiles of the plastic cases to accommodate the increasing crowds streaming through their doors. Indeed, though fewer than 175,000 VCRs had been sold by 1978, a steep price drop led to a sales explosion: four million machines were in American homes by 1982 (Cahill 1988, 127–128). Given that adult videotapes made up nearly half of all available content in those early years, it makes sense that Kesten and Martin would seize on another idea that would link the “back room” of video stores to the similarly explosive video gaming market: create the first games intended for adults (Coopersmith 2000, 27).³ Under the brand name Mystique, they designed a “How to Score” series made up of three games: *Custer's Revenge*, *Bachelor Party*, and *Beat 'em & Eat 'em*.⁴

These games were, ultimately, an attempt to transport users’ joysticks from living rooms into bedrooms, much as adult video companies were doing at the time with various home video formats. Given this, AMI licensed the “Swedish Erotica” brand name from Caballero Control Corporation (CCC), a veteran adult film production house and successful video distributor. AMI no doubt hoped that many of the same consumers familiar with CCC’s videos would be willing to try adult games.⁵ Licensing the “Swedish Erotica” label was, according to Kesten, intended to “help give the games credibility with video outlets that are used to selling [CCC’s] video cassettes” (Marguiles 1982b, E1). The games would retail for \$49.95 (equivalent to \$122 in 2015 dollars), \$10 to \$15 more than most other titles, following the tradition of adult-oriented material commanding a higher market price (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2015; Coopersmith 1998, 94). AMI began publicity efforts in the fall of 1982, with a goal of releasing the three titles in time for Christmas.

The games themselves were obvious, deliberate variations on familiar and recognizable Atari titles. Much like the decision to license the “Swedish Erotica” label, this strategy not only allowed AMI to push the games into the market quickly but also eliminated much of a learning curve for players. For example, *Beat 'em & Eat 'em* is essentially *Kaboom!* (Activision, 1981), only instead of catching bombs dropped by the “Mad Bomber” into buckets, the player’s objective is to maneuver two nude

women beneath a man ejaculating from a rooftop. When all the semen is caught, the two women lick their lips, and a new level appears. Similarly, *Bachelor Party* is simply a re-skinned *Breakout* (Atari, 1976). But in lieu of striking colored bricks with a bouncing *Pong*-style ball, a nude man bounces around the screen careening into nude women. At the beginning of gameplay, the man has an erect penis, which gradually decreases after these “sexual encounters,” before rising again for a new level.

Given the obvious sexual nature of these games, however rudimentary and crude their actual visuals and gameplay, AMI knew that they faced a specific obstacle in their quest for market success, namely, distributing and marketing a product clearly intended for adults in a landscape overwhelmingly associated with children’s entertainment—even if it was not just children actually playing the games. As publicity efforts began in earnest in October 1982, Kesten tried to mollify potential concerns alongside the standard marketing pitch: “Our object is not to arouse; our object is to entertain. When people play our games, we want them smiling, we want them laughing.” He continued, “If the kids get hold of them, it’ll be ok. There’s nothing wrong. They’re cartoonish; they’re tongue-in-cheek adult situations that are not offensive—except to the player when he doesn’t score enough points” (Marguiles 1982b, E1). In fact, AMI went even further as the release approached, saying that the games would not be sold to minors—a somewhat hollow promise, as that decision would be made by individual retailers (Wise 1982, 7).⁶ All of this conspicuous public outreach put AMI in a somewhat contradictory position: using the “Swedish Erotica” label to attract customers familiar with CCC’s pornographic video offerings was a deliberate attempt to position the games in a specific adults-only context, even as the company was entering a market aimed almost entirely at children and families. Yet none of this deterred AMI, which planned to have 750,000 units of the three games on the market before Christmas, and two-dozen additional titles for sale by the end of 1983. Kesten boasted to the press in mid-November 1982 that “AMI will become the nation’s second-largest video cartridge firm behind Atari” (Graham 1982, 110, 115).

If AMI’s initial efforts to build buzz around the games had gone somewhat smoothly, the company’s next move was an unmitigated disaster. Planning to debut *Custer’s Revenge* at the National Music, Sound, and Video Conference in mid-October 1982, AMI invited “members of local area women’s groups and American Indian organizations to preview the game before the show opened,” an audacious combination of invitation and provocation that put AMI squarely on the national radar (Wise 1982, 7). On October 14, protesters from various women’s and Native Americans’ groups gathered outside the New York Hilton where the show was being held, along with members of the press happy to capture the burgeoning controversy. Michael Bush of the American Indian Community House of New York told reporters that the game provided “a reinforcement of the stereotyping of American Indians as something less than human,” while Robin Quinn of Women Against Pornography argued that, in the game, “rape is not only a legitimate form of revenge but a legitimate form of entertainment” (“Atari Trying to Halt X-Rated Video Games” 1982, 88; Haberman and Johnston 1982, B3). AMI did not backpedal in its subsequent response but instead inflamed tensions further, with a company spokesperson arguing that *Custer’s Revenge* featured

“consenting video images.” He added, “Besides, it’s not that literal. With Atari figures, you’re limited with how explicit you can get—they’re cruder than cartoon characters” (Haberman and Johnston 1982, B3). AMI’s attempt to defuse the controversy backfired dramatically and disastrously, and put the games even more squarely before an increasingly suspicious and wary public.

Not surprisingly, Atari weighed in the following day, with Atari’s consumer electronics division president Michael Moone lamenting AMI’s decision to create and market the games. In a statement, he said, “Unfortunately, some individuals take refuge behind certain legal precepts to the dismay of the majority of the people” (Marguiles 1982a, H1). Two days later, the game giant said it would take legal action against AMI to keep its games off the market, for failing “to adequately disassociate itself from Atari, thereby capitalizing on Atari’s name and trademark” (“The Brouhaha over X-Rated Video Games” 1982, 145). Kesten responded to the growing furor, calling the protests and legal threat “amazing, since they have not seen the games.” He continued, “The purpose of the games was not and is not and will never be to offend anybody. I think they are making more out of it than it deserves” (Marguiles 1982a, H1). By that point, however, the fact that nearly no one had actually *seen* the games mattered little; as with pornography in general in the early 1980s, the perception of danger dominated the discourse.

Indeed, just as AMI was in the midst of these challenges, another powerful voice decrying video games joined the conversation. On November 9, 1982, during a speech on family violence at the University of Pittsburgh, United States, Surgeon General C. Everett Koop expressed concern that video games might be hazardous to the health of children, claiming that they were becoming addicted “body and soul.” Noting that he had no specific evidence to back up the claim, Koop nevertheless maintained that video games could lead to adverse mental and physical effects and incite children to violence (“Surgeon General Sees Danger in Video Games” 1982, A16). Reaction from game manufacturers was swift, with industry groups calling for an immediate retraction; Atari Chairman Raymond Kassar told reporters, “We are appalled,” and the National Coin Machine Institute sent a telegram to President Ronald Reagan characterizing the incident as “an uncalled-for witch hunt.” Koop issued a statement saying his remarks were representative only of his personal views, but refused to retract them (Blustein 1982, 10). The damage, however, had been done. The game industry, along with its escalating sales and public popularity, was now associated with encouraging and inciting violent behavior in children.⁷

For AMI, what followed was a series of legal actions, beginning with Atari filing a lawsuit for perceived intellectual property infringement. Specifically, Atari believed its customers would associate AMI’s products with Atari’s brand despite the disclaimer on the game boxes that read “Mystique is not affiliated with Atari, Inc.” (see the bottom of Figure 1). “Several people have written to us that they are distressed that Atari would be doing this,” noted Atari’s attorney Kenneth J. Nussbacher. “People have been telling us they are going to throw out our products.” Yet, he was also aware of the constitutional issues involved, claiming the company wanted to avoid First Amendment battles by limiting the suit to trademark concerns—a creative workaround, given that the real anxiety was over content (“The Brouhaha over X-Rated Video Games” 1982,

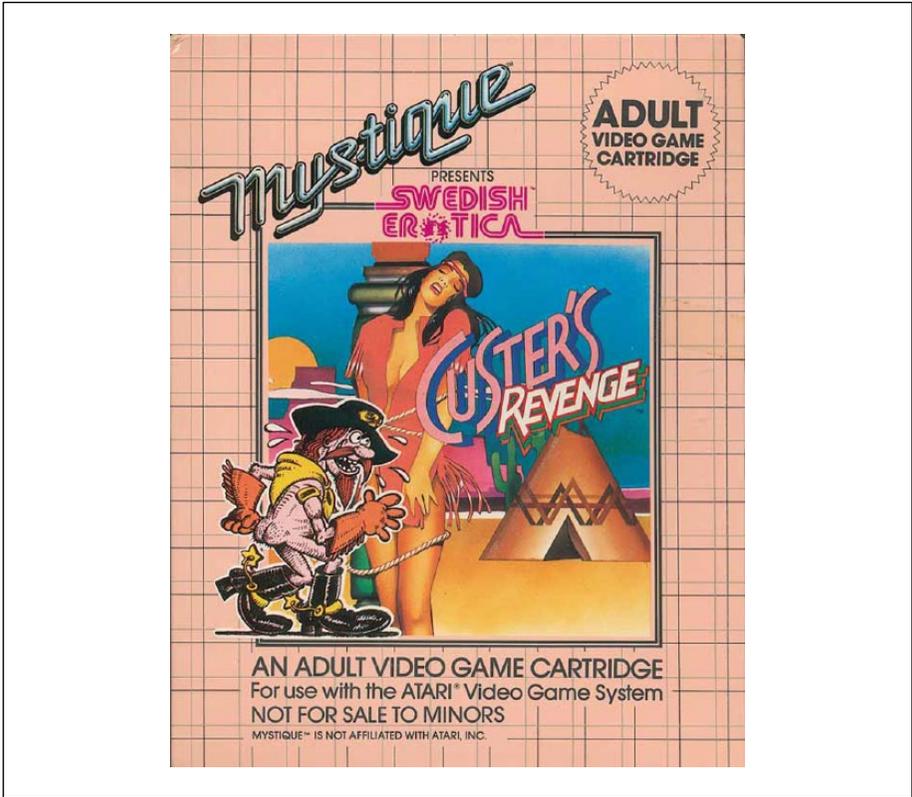


Figure 1. Box art for *Custer's Revenge* (1982).

Source: atariage.com.

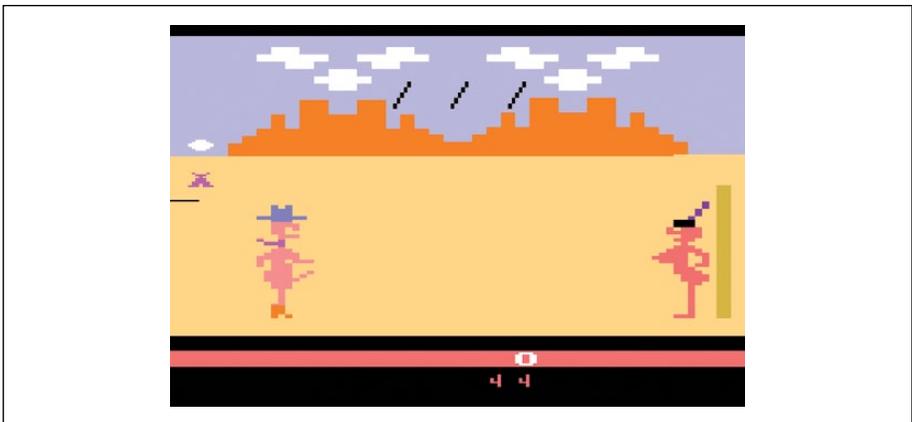


Figure 2. Screen shot of *Custer's Revenge* (1982).

Source: atariage.com.

145). As the *New York Times* correctly pointed out, Atari's actions could be seen as an emblematic response to broader tensions regarding the encroachment of pornography onto new consumer technologies such as the VCR and cable television ("The Brouhaha over X-Rated Video Games" 1982, 145). In Atari's case, that meant stemming the tide as quickly as possible to restore an aura of "decency" to its brand. Indeed, Moone, claiming that Atari was receiving some 1,500 complaints per day by mid-November 1982, told *People* that "we've built a business on family entertainment. We want those games off the market" (Graham 1982, 115).⁸

Lending their considerable weight to the public discourse surrounding the growing controversy were the various feminist groups that had been involved from the first protest outside the New York Hilton. Indeed, at the 1982 National Organization for Women convention, copies of a petition protesting *Custer's Revenge* were distributed to representatives of more than eight hundred local chapters. When *Ms. Magazine* covered the controversy, noting NOW's involvement, AMI continued its disastrous public reactions pattern, with a company spokesperson claiming that *Custer's Revenge* was "strictly for fun. These little . . . figures are not doing violence to women. The only thing that might be construed as violent is tying an Indian maiden to a post and ravishing her, but he doesn't beat her first" (Hornaday 1983, 21).⁹ Such statements, along with the strong associations between children and games, turned the company's products into a political target extending beyond feminist mobilization.

In the United States, a handful of local governments used "the family" as the basis for regulatory action. In October 1982, the Oklahoma City Council passed a resolution denouncing *Custer's Revenge* and other adult games as "distasteful" and "not in the best interests of the community" (Paschal 1983). Also in October, Suffolk County, New York, legislator Philip Nolan held hearings to determine whether or not the adult video games posed an "imminent danger to the health and safety" of county citizens (Rather 1983, 6). In mid-November, the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors, after testimony from the County Commission on the Status of Women, voted to draw up an ordinance banning the sale of certain adult video games deemed offensive to American Indians and women, and planned to ask the State of California to ban such games as well (Michaelson 1982, D4). For AMI, the tide had irrevocably turned, and the plans to capture a massive market in time for Christmas were all but doomed.

In a last-ditch attempt to restore credibility and reduce legal scrutiny, AMI filed suit against Suffolk County on November 30, 1982. AMI sought \$11 million in damages, claiming that the county had violated its constitutional rights and deterred distributors from ordering the game. Attorney John Weston (who had represented the adult film industry in similar legal actions) warned that AMI would be "vigorous" in pursuing legal action against similar efforts to prohibit sales of the company's games (Baron 1982, E1). Neither side, however, gained much traction: AMI dropped the suit in February 1983, and Suffolk County never progressed beyond the idea stage in terms of regulating adult video games ("Long Island Journal" 1983, L13). By that point, however, AMI's overall efforts had already come to a complete halt. In early January 1983, AMI discontinued distribution of all the adult games, including *Custer's Revenge*. Kesten's final commentary on the matter was more of the contradictory mix

that had defined AMI's efforts: "The publicity was just so negative that it was interfering with our company's business." Yet, as if to backpedal one last time, he also noted that stopping production of the game "was the proper thing to do" (Paschal 1983). With that, AMI retreated permanently from the video games market. But *Custer's Revenge* and the other games did not go with them.

Custer's Redux: Playaround and the "Double Enders"

Following AMI's decision to discontinue *Custer's Revenge*, JHM, Ltd., the Hong Kong-based manufacturer, found a new distributor for the "How to Score" series in early 1983. California-based GameSource would market *Beat 'em & Eat 'em* and *Bachelor Party* under their label *Playaround*. Hoping to foreclose some of the publicity turmoil, and in the process raising the bar on the "desire machine" patina surrounding the issue, GameSource also decided to package the games in a faux-leather case (inside the regular game box), with a miniature lock and key, ostensibly to keep children from having access, but also creating an aura of erotic desirability which did not emanate from the gameplay itself.

Most of all, aware of the disastrous negative publicity, GameSource distanced itself from the toxic *Custer's Revenge* and its media circus. Spokesperson Richard Miller wasted no time getting a statement to the press:

We are 100% in favor of good sexual fun between consenting video images, but no company would want to be associated with either racism or violence toward women. Such things have no place within the context of a video game. (Marguiles 1983, G7)

Curiously, this vociferous rejection of the game extended only to the American market. Despite GameSource's public statements, the company continued to distribute the game in international markets with a few modifications. *Custer's Revenge* was renamed *Westward Ho*, and the Native American woman's hand now waved in a "come hither" gesture as the General approached. That simple gesture (along with a slight wobble of her breasts each time the hand moved) was apparently enough to ease GameSource's concerns about "racism and violence toward women," and to create an aura of "good sexual fun," at least for international consumers.

But this was hardly the only misdirection and attempt to manipulate the media and consumers. In fact, the entire "new company" narrative was all but fabricated—and not very well, as a *Ms. Magazine* investigation discovered (Skurnik 1983, 27). The president of Playaround was none other than Joel Martin, Kesten's partner in AMI, and JHM, Ltd. stood for "Joel H. Martin." Playaround was created to make the withdrawal announcement, dampen some of the controversy, and keep the games on the market. Martin had clearly bought out Kesten's share of the company (minus the *Mystique* name and Swedish *Erotica* licensing) and crafted a narrative to make it appear as if a new, completely unrelated company with a commitment to responsibility had taken over the games. Indeed, even Miller's "consenting video images" statement had been crafted by AMI's publicists (Skurnik 1983, 27). It was an inauspicious reset.

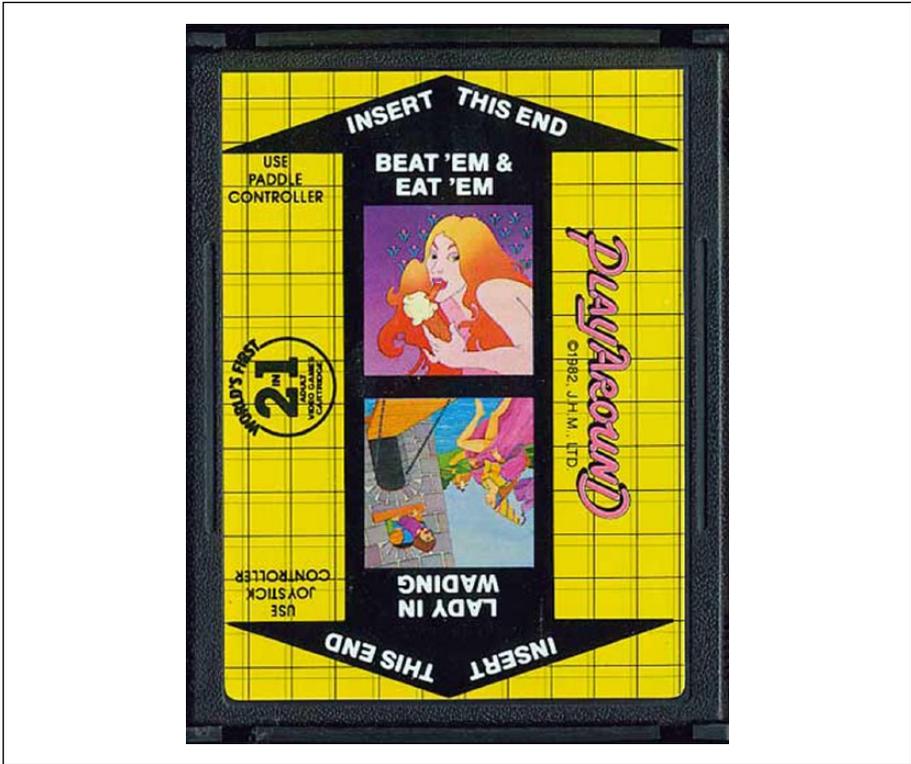


Figure 3. Playaround’s distinct “double-ender” cartridge design.
Source: atariage.com.

Along with the misdirection attempt, Martin’s Playaround also left an indelible historical mark with a fumbling attempt to create adult games intended for women. Indeed, Playaround’s legacy must surely be defined by the production of the “double-ender” game cartridges and their intended purpose. Named for their distinctive design, these long cartridges offered players two different games, accessible simply by turning the cartridge around and re-inserting it into the Atari system (Figure 3). Physical design choice was merely the beginning: the game pairings were made so that there was ostensibly a title designed for heterosexual men and another for heterosexual women. Playaround’s impulse might have been to eradicate charges of sexism that had plagued AMI by creating something “for” women (even if only to stabilize the market by alleviating criticism), but the result was a bizarre, oddly constructed set of game premises that further illustrate the distanciation from traditional erotic material, as well as the difficulty of combining 8-bit technology, sex, and gameplay (to say nothing of the attempt to manufacture a niche erotic game market for adult women).

The key to the “double-enders” was a simple inversion of the characters and ludic activities, making it easier to create a second game. For example, in international

markets, *Westward Ho* was “flipped” as *General Re-treat*, in which the Native American woman, here given the name “Revenge,” approaches a bound Custer, dodging cannon fire, before having sex with him. *Bachelor Party* was flipped as *Bachelorette Party*, with a simple gender inversion of the characters marking the only difference. *Beat 'em & Eat 'em* was flipped as *Philly Flasher*. In this version, nude men stand below a lactating woman, catching her milk drops, concluding with masturbation and ejaculation upon level completion. This effort to force the mechanics of the original game into a flipped version resulted in simultaneously juvenile and fetishistic scenarios that reveal the difficulty of 8-bit adult game design.

Playaround also created three new titles, which were then also flipped. *Jungle Fever* and its inverted version *Burning Desire* features a nude man (or woman) hovering from a helicopter dodging stones thrown by cannibals while trying to save a man (or woman) from being consumed by flames. By ejaculating (or lactating), the player extinguishes the flames. *Cathouse Blues*—flipped as *Gigolo*—offers a slightly more elaborate narrative. A licentious man (or woman) dodges police and muggers while visiting brothels, paying in each one for sex with prostitutes. *Knight on the Town* or *Lady in Wading*, the least “erotic” of the new titles, follows a knight building a drawbridge across a moat to save a princess (or prince), all the while dodging a dragon, alligator, and gremlin. These new games were not offered on the same “double-ender” cartridges, but were instead distributed in odd pairings.

Once again, this effort was no more than the re-skinning of already derivative games. It is unclear whether the revamped packaging, the double-ender design, and the “new” game offerings were elements that Martin carried over from *Mystique*—but it certainly seems possible. Nevertheless, the point remains that the marketing and game design were equally clumsy with attempts to force vaguely erotic elements into traditional game mechanics—ejaculate and breast milk, most frequently—being indicative of poor game design and strange depictions of the sort of “traditional” sexual behavior that was ostensibly the goal. Playaround’s ham-fisted attempt to create a women’s market by gender-swapping the avatars was an abject failure, as was any attempt to generate even a modicum of sophomoric humor. In addition to their crass offensiveness, as critic Tim Moriarty (1983, 19) noted at the time, the games were also poorly designed to the point of triggering actual player boredom. For Playaround, there was an entire community of players that was being ignored. But women were not asking for these games; in fact, it seemed nobody was asking for them. GameSource shut down the Playaround line shortly after initiating the deal with JHM, Ltd.

“Somewhere in Between”: Gamex and *X-Man*

This situation changed slightly in 1983 with Universal Gamex’s *X-Man*, which had no connection to Marvel’s *X-Men* comic book. Created by Alan Roberts, a former director of industrial and softcore adult films, the player in *X-Man* must navigate a nude man, replete with 8-bit erection, through a *Pac-Man*-like maze containing moving scissors, teeth, and crabs (Figure 4). If the player can reach the door at the center of the board, the screen changes to a wide profile view of what the game manual called “a sexy surprise.”



Figure 4. Screen shot of Universal Gamex's *X-Man* (1983).

Source: atariage.com.

There, the player controls a blocky man having sex with “the sexy blonde” woman for thirty seconds (*X-Man Game Manual* 1983). Each subsequent completed maze level offers a new “sexy surprise,” with different sexual positions awaiting the player. Although it is difficult to argue that Roberts’ *X-Man* is a well-designed game or that it offers engaging or erotic play, it is nevertheless an interesting attempt at pairing game mechanics and a scoring system with a premise in ways that the previous games failed to achieve.

A few observations should throw its gameplay differences into further relief. First, *X-Man* sports a modest complexity of design (again, relatively speaking) where one must navigate challenges on one screen before arriving at another. This did not exist in previous, single-screen adult games. Second, instead of presenting the sexual union between the woman and the (X-)man as the endgame, the 8-bit coitus in the second gameplay screen presents yet another challenge. The objective during this quasi-rhythm mini-game is to match the woman’s movements to maximize her orgasms (visualized by her flashing nipples), gaining points on a “sexual excitement meter” with each thrust. A countdown timer adds to the tension, with bonus points awarded for how quickly the player reaches climax. Finally, we see a modicum of symbolic playfulness absent from the previous offerings in the game’s villains, with the malicious scissors, teeth, and crabs that guard the player’s path clearly playing on fears of castration, the vagina dentata, and venereal diseases.¹⁰

If the previous game makers tended anxiously to teeter between two distinct poles regarding their games—they were either harmless and fine for children or, like the Swedish Erotica line, designed for adult titillation—then Roberts showed a surprising degree of nuance about his creation. He also clearly understood the nexus of technological limitation and pornography regulation, unlike his predecessors. “If pornography is defined as arousing prurient interests,” said Roberts,

then I have yet to see anyone who has been aroused by *X-Man* or any other adult game . . . They don't fit in with regular games and they don't fit in with adult movies. They're somewhere in between. They're adult, but they're not pornographic. (Moriarty 1983, 60)

Roberts was undoubtedly correct. However, given what comprised the “sexy surprises” of *X-Man*, that was surely only because 8-bit technology did not allow for more visually sophisticated renderings. In any case, for Gamex it was too late.

We have not had the full support of the major wholesalers in the U.S. They have designed corporate policies in many cases in reaction to the bad publicity of the Mystique games. They have decided that all videogames are naughty. (Moriarty 1983, 19)

Custer's Revenge had effectively poisoned the well.

Conclusion: The Regulatory Money Shot

If the January 1982 *Time* cover story captured the excitement surrounding the video game industry, the fervor was short-lived. By fall 1983, the industry was reeling, suffering from a glut of poorly designed games well beyond the adult titles described here. Even Atari lost a staggering \$536 million in 1983, along with CEO Raymond Kassar, who resigned in the middle of the collapse (Kleinfield 1983, D4). And while the market failure of the adult games was a small piece of a much larger economic crisis, it suggests a crucial question specific to their intended genre: what is the “money shot” in adult video games? This familiar moment of narrative closure in hard-core pornography presents (typically male) visible ejaculation at the conclusion of a scene.¹¹ It captures, as Linda Williams (1999, 101) describes, “the visual evidence of the mechanical ‘truth’ of bodily pleasure caught in involuntary spasm.” The “money shot,” standing in for the efforts to capture pleasure in mediated form—what Williams (1999, 36) calls “the frenzy of the visible”—becomes especially relevant for 8-bit video games, and raises questions about the nature and definition of pornography more generally. Could an 8-bit game, with all of its technological, representational, and narrative limitations capture and present this sort of “truth”—particularly in a climactic (both narrative and sexual) sense?

The answer was no: these games—these desire machines—were not about closure; they could not be “finished” in the same way as an adult film scene. Nor could they actually depict sexual pleasure, unlike their home video cousins, or offer the kind of “resonance” that Paasonen (2011, 16) describes as “moments and experiences of being moved, touched, and affected” by what spectators see in pornography. The actual games offered little more than the *idea* of sex wrapped up in a shiny new technology. The “money shot,” as it were, might have been the anticipation of something that, in the end, could never actually be delivered. That distinction, though, was meaningless in terms of regulation. After all, as Kendrick (1987, xiii) argues, pornography is “not a thing but a concept, a thought structure,” meaning the *idea* of sex was dangerous enough for those seeking to contain and limit its expressions, however dull and technologically simple. Adult games,

at least on the Atari 2600, disappeared—but not before they played a crucial and somewhat forgotten role in the cultural regulation of pornography in the early 1980s.¹²

The rudimentary design and commercial failure of the Atari adult-oriented games belie their complexity and importance as charged cultural objects existing at the nexus of technology, sex, and economics. Moving forward, media historians and game scholars should expand Krzywinska's notion of "desire machines" to include more diffuse operators and actors beyond the game console or the individual titles. There is not one but at least three drivers of anticipatory pleasures in this history: (1) the game designs, (2) the manufacturing and marketing of the carts and packaging, and (3) the controversy, public debate, and ensuing regulation. This last emphasis should continue to account for Foucault's "field of force relations" and the ways in which the controversy occurred in complex and multivalent ways—not least of which was how the game manufacturers harnessed the commercial power of sexual taboos in the hopes they would garner the same attention (and success) that adult video was gaining.

Ultimately, the affective power of these games resided not in what was realized graphically but in what was teased and withheld from view, not just for potential consumers but critics as well. After all, the overwhelming majority of the public outcry over the original games occurred in the absence of actual knowledge of the games themselves. If the "money shot" in adult film is the visual "proof" that pleasure has occurred, then perhaps the climactic event for the adult Atari games was not in the content but in the regulations that transformed suspect ideas into taboo technologies of desire. The controversy that surrounded these games is inseparable now from how we understand their attempts at stoking anticipatory pleasures. Both served as "desire machines," embodying Foucault's (1990, 105–106) belief that sexuality is "a great surface network in which the stimulation of bodies, the intensification of pleasures, the incitement to discourse, the formation of special knowledges, the strengthening of controls and resistances, are linked to one another." *Custer's Revenge* and the other adult-oriented Atari games of the 1980s characterize just such a node on the "surface network" of tensions and anxieties of the era and, as such, represent much more than a failed and forgotten entertainment technology. In the end, they symbolize a general desire for regulation and the disciplining of how sexual gameplay might yet be imagined and configured, however crudely, for newly mediated spaces.

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Notes

1. See, for example, Tristan Donovan (2010) and Mark J. P. Wolf (2007, 110).
2. Technically, the term *8-bit* refers to a game's processor and its capabilities. More frequently, the term serves as shorthand for the second-generation (1976–1984) and third-generation (1983–1990) of video game console development.
3. There was one antecedent: *Softporn Adventure*, a text-based game created in 1981 by Charles Benton and released by On-Line Systems (later Sierra On-Line) for the Apple II computer (along with a version for the Atari 800; see Nooney 2014 and "Softporn" 1982, 33).
4. This emphasis on the double meaning of "scoring" runs throughout the games' promotional literature. AMI planned (but never ran) advertisements in *Playboy* and *Penthouse* that would have boasted, "When you score . . . you score!" further solidifying the framework (Marguiles 1982b, E1; "Video Games are Revealing" 1982, A8).
5. The "Swedish Erotica" line had nothing to do with Sweden; instead, it was a marketing ploy by Caballero to associate its products with the constructed sexual cultures of Scandinavia that had found cinematic success since the 1960s. See Eric Schaefer (2014, 207–234).
6. Video game retailers still decide what titles are sold to whom, based on the recommendations of the Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB), created in 1994. For example, major retailers typically don't sell "M" (for mature) games to those 17 years of age or younger, and most refuse outright to stock "AO" (adult only) titles.
7. The fears of a connection between media and violence in children that played out during this period had roots in the comic book crisis of the late 1940s, as described in David Hajdu (2009). The first similar panic to strike the games industry was in 1976, following the release of *Death Race* (based loosely on the film of the same name), as described in Carly A. Kocurek's (2012) essay.
8. Moone did not mention that, in 1973, Atari had released *Gotcha*, an arcade game colloquially known among its developers as the "boob game" for its two pink, breast-shaped controllers. The game was not successful and did not last on the market long (Brathwaite 2006, 27).
9. Such statements become a rallying point within the antipornography feminist movements of the era, and references to the game appeared in Andrea Dworkin's *Letters from a War Zone* (1986, 317) as well as in the *Final Report of the Attorney General's Commission on Pornography* (U.S. Attorney General's Commission on Pornography, 1986, 221).
10. From the game box:

Coming at you are the "Crabs" with their claws ready to tear your privates apart. Next come the "Scissors" whose sharp blades can cut off your manhood. And last are the "Teeth" who snap with a vise-like grip that will leave more than just marks. Get the picture? (*X-Man* Game Box 1983)

11. In his adult filmmaking handbook, Steven Ziplow (1977, 34) describes the importance of the "money shot" within the industry: "There are those who believe the . . . 'money shot' is the most important element in the movie and that everything else (if necessary) should be sacrificed at its expense."
12. Adult games did find success later, beginning with *Leisure Suit Larry in the Land of the Lounge Lizards* (1987). The wildly successful game, created by Al Lowe for Sierra On-Line, was essentially a remake of *Softporn Adventure* with added graphics, and spawned numerous sequels (Morrissette 1999, NP).

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