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

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The Atari Video Computer System dominated the home video game market so completely that "Atari" became the generic term for a video game console. The Atari VCS was affordable and offered the flexibility of changeable cartridges. Nearly a thousand of these were created, the most significant of which established new techniques, mechanics, and even entire genres. This book offers a detailed and accessible study of this influential video game console from both computational and cultural perspectives. Studies of digital media have rarely investigated platforms--the systems underlying computing. This book (the first in a series of Platform Studies) does so, developing a critical approach that examines the relationship between platforms and creative expression. Nick Montfort and Ian Bogost discuss the Atari VCS itself and examine in detail six game cartridges: *Combat*, *Adventure*, *Pac-Man*, *Yars' Revenge*, *Pitfall!*, and *Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back*. They describe the technical constraints and affordances of the system and track developments in programming, gameplay, interface, and aesthetics. *Adventure*, for example, was the first game to represent a virtual space larger than the screen (anticipating the boundless virtual spaces of such later games as *World of Warcraft* and *Grand Theft Auto*), by allowing the player to walk off one side into another space; and *Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back* was an early instance of interaction between media properties and video games. Montfort and Bogost show that the Atari VCS--often considered merely a retro fetish object--is an essential part of the history of video games.

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