



# BEFORE THE CRASH

early video game history



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EDITED BY MARK J.P. WOLF

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o the ways in which users respond to media, redefine their uses, and contribute meanings that resonate within media culture at large. The public surface of game culture is produced by massive identity machineries operated by software and hardware manufacturers with the willing support of advertisers and popular media outlets. Gamers and enthusiasts add their share as well, circulating information, opinions, and rumors on countless online forums (including “independent” blog sites covertly funded by the media industry). A media archaeology of gaming penetrates beyond this uneven, reflective, and multipatterned surface, looking for symptoms of neglected and suppressed developments behind it. While illuminating the past, media-archaeological excavations also help us question the received truths of contemporary culture.

#### BACK TO THE FUTURE, OR PRE-POSITIONING THE VIDEO GAME CONSOLE

In 1978, Magnavox, the American television manufacturer that had reinvented itself as a pioneer of domestic video gaming, released Odyssey<sup>2</sup>, another descendent of its legendary flagship product, the Odyssey (1972). A magazine advertisement promoting the Odyssey<sup>2</sup>, shows a grinning father and smiling daughter staring intensely at each other, clutching joysticks between their fingers (Fig. 2.1).<sup>6</sup> Both are shown in profile, the console and TV-screen game display between them, facing the reader—we are obviously invited to place ourselves within the picture via identification. The projectile shot by the father’s avatar is bouncing from a tree—a *miss!*—whereas the daughter’s avatar is about to make a direct hit at the “father figure”—*bang!* The ad presents Odyssey<sup>2</sup> as a way of bonding—family members, sexes, and generations—but in a playfully subversive and mischievous way. Reversing prevailing social norms, the daughter may humiliate her father without being punished, as long as it happens within the virtual world of the game.

The text presents the console as the “ultimate gift” (probably from the father to the family). The slogan at the bottom sums up Magnavox’s mission: “We make staying home fun.” For the media archaeologist, this is not the whole story or even the full sentence. Its unstated cultural subtext could be formulated as follows: “so that children will never leave their parents, and will stay away from bars, game arcades, and other bad influences.” Underlying the slogan is the implicit suggestion that without the system, staying at home is *not* fun. The “transgression” of social norms the ad hints at serves this purpose: the Odyssey<sup>2</sup>, connected with the domestic television set, provides the daughter a harmless way of releasing whatever pressures

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