

Soviet Invaders

Space Invaders, it's not *just* a game

Justin Isaf
McGill University / National University of Singapore
Posted on AutochthonousDiaspora.com
February 7, 2007

The game Space Invaders can be looked at in two different ways, anecdotally and theoretically. Let me begin with the anecdotal account.

Space Invaders in the quintessential representation of the military-industrial-entertainment complex¹ which pervaded the early (and to a certain extent, current) development of computer technology and gaming design². Space Invaders could as easily be seen as a remediation³ of the prevailing trend of science-fiction movies, following on from the hype surrounding the recently released movie StarWars (1977⁴) however, the Cold War mentality of the late 1970s, the rapid advance in computer technology funded by the US military and the fear of missile based attacks on the US created a social environment where a game such as Space Invaders, as well as the movie StarWars, would be well received and held as a common “language” despite its being an inherently individual endeavour⁵.

During the cold war, the US government pumped large sums of money into the development of various computer technologies which were initially designed to calculate such things as missile trajectories to and from the Soviet Union and allies, but which were quickly put to use by white-hat hackers for more enjoyable (if not completely neutral) purposes⁶. The first example of this was the basic but watershed game of SpaceWars!⁷ and was quickly followed by many others as the computer shrunk in size

¹ See Kline, Witheford and De Peuter

² Halter, 2006

³ See Bolter and Grusin

⁴ <http://www.the-numbers.com/movies/index1976.php> , Accessed Feb 10 2006.

⁵ Caillois

⁶ Kline, Witheford and De Peuter

⁷ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spacewar%21>

and companies such as Midway and Atari appeared to take advantage of this new technology.

While many early game coders were staunch pacifists and wanted nothing to do with the military⁸, the fact remains that very little of what they coded on or coded with would have existed without the active involvement of Military funding. Indeed, many fledgling programming and gaming companies got their big breaks contracting themselves out to the military to create simulation and training games for soldiers⁹.

There was also, thanks in a large part to Joseph McCarthy and the leadup to the Star Wars Missile Defence System, a certain social fascination with space based missile attacks from the “red menace”¹⁰ helped by collaborators inside the US. This concern is clearly reflected in the theme of Space Invaders in which the player is challenged to stop a space based attack of relentlessly approaching, missile launching, space-based enemies.

On a more theoretical level, Space Invaders can be seen from the perspective of semiotics and control, where references to missile attacks, the “Space Race,” and science fiction could be seen to give a game as simple as Space Invaders meaning vis-à-vis the Cold War. At the same time, the ability of the player to control the defence against the invading enemy (protecting whatever the imagination provides) can be seen as a pleasurable experience fulfilling a social role.¹¹

⁸ Halter, 2006

⁹ The military supposedly contracted Atari to make a version of BattleZone called “Bradley Trainer” to train soldiers in tank combat.

¹⁰ Note that the flying saucer worth many points in Space Invaders is red

¹¹ This defensive role was taken further and made overt by games such as the 1980 “Missile Command” by Atari

From the perspective of the technology itself, there was a certain degree of hypermediacy¹² to the game of Space Invaders. There was little attempt to put the player “in the game” drawing attention to the very fact that you *could* play this and do these things with your computer and along with other games such as Pac-Man¹³ and Missile Command, helped players and society as a whole believe in the technological advances of America and its allies compared to their Russian counterparts.

So we see that both from an anecdotal and theoretical perspective, Space Invaders is a representation of the development, mentality, Cold-War fear, funding and socializing which surrounded games and game technology in the late ‘70s and 80s. It is a wonderful representation of the games of that era – military, hypermediate, and socially embedded in technology.

¹² Bolter and Grusin

¹³ Pac-Man was originally developed in Japan, which at the time was a US ally in the Cold-War and the game was soon exported to the US and adopted by US consumer society as its own.

Bibliography:

Textual:

Bolter, J. & Grusin, R.: "Computer Games." In: *Remediation: Understanding New Media*.

Caillois: "The Social Function of Games" & "Simulation and Vertigo." In: *Man, Play, and Games*.

Halter, Ed. "From Sun-Tzu to X-Box: War and Video Games" (2006, Thunder's Mouth Press)

Kline, Dyer-Whiteford & De Peuter: "Origins of an Industry." In: *Digital Play*.

Kline, Dyer-Whiteford & De Peuter: "An Ideal Commodity?" In: *Digital Play*.

Perlin, K.: "Can There Be a Form between a Game and a Story?" In: Wardrip-Fruin & Harrigan (eds): *First Person*.

Internet:

<http://www.the-numbers.com/movies/index1976.php>

<http://www.Wikipedia.com>