

Arcade-style game design: postwar pinball and the golden age of coin-op videogames



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Abstract

Several major design elements that we often take for granted in early coin-op videogames-including rule automation, real-time button play, and fiction as static theme-originated decades prior as innovations within the pinball industry. These similarities occurred on account of a number of key personnel doing leading work in both industries, convergent evolution around the business model shared by both game forms, and an irreversible trend of coin-op games becoming more differentiated and having better contextualized objectives. Although echoes of these qualities exist in more modern videogames, the relatively pure combination of these traits in early coin-op games resulted in a type of game style unfamiliar, or even off-putting, to players whose gameplay experiences are limited primarily to newer games from the past two decades. Because the coin-op gameplay formula achieved high replay value with little content, and required only minimal instruction, aspects of it have been rediscovered within the modern casual games movement and indie mobile games. Patterns from the historical relationship between pinball and coin-op videogames can serve as a lens for gaining another perspective on more recent issues and trends in the game industry, from the inherent issues with motion control to the rapid industry-changing shift toward social games.

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