REVISING THE ATARI COLLECTION AND MAINTENANCE POLICIES
OF THE WPI GORDON LIBRARY

An Interactive Qualifying Project submitted to the Faculty of WORCESTER POLYTECHNIC INSTITUTE in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Science

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ABSTRACT

In a world where games are becoming a larger influence in our lives the library needs an updated system for obtaining, cataloging, and loaning Atari gear. My goal on this project was to determine what our library had, needed, and what to preserve. I accomplished this by researching Atari’s history, appraisal sites, and consulting with the archivists about maintenance. I will conclude this project with instructions for future curators and a list of Atari items for the WPI Library.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Before we begin I would like to thank Professor Dean O’Donnell for making me aware of this project as well as our weekly meetings to discuss policy and potential research sources. I would also like to thank both Michael Kemezis and Jessica Colati for their advice on how to properly handle the Atari Equipment in the library and allowing me to take pictures for my IQP project.
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1. INTRODUCTION

During one of my many meetings with Professor O’Donnell, he relayed to me an anecdote about how an estimated 86% of all silent films ever made (nearly 11,500 films in total), due to the use of cellulose in their production, no longer exist due to decay, fire damage, or just plain old negligence. Though they are made of hardier materials like plastic, WPI and other Atari collectors around the world need to make a deliberate effort to collect these vital pieces of video game history, or risk losing them to the sands of time like the similarly outdated, but no less culturally relevant, silent films.

With this mindset, I chose this IQP that was suggested to me by Professor Dean O’Donnell during the Winter of 2016. Building upon a previous Video Game Archive IQPs, I was determined to ascertain what games and peripherals our collection possessed, what games and peripherals our collection needed, and by which standards we had to judge and evaluate said games and peripherals. Additionally, the previous IQP failed to account for the price of new games and peripherals for our collection or suggest a budget due to operating under the assumption that all new Atari equipment would be the product of generous donors rather than purchased by the library itself. The Archive also lacked rules and guidelines for the care and cleaning of these rare and precious items. Finally, we needed some ground rules about how to loan these games or oversee students who wanted to play these games in the library.

Over the course of C-Term, my goal was to determine how to preserve historically significant Atari Games while allowing students to play them. This dichotomy is the crux of the IQP, the gamble of repairing or restoring archival material at the risk of rendering them
permanently inoperable. So while researching and cataloging the Atari Inventories, I asked myself two questions.

1. Why do we need to see the beginning of video games?

2. How do we preserve video games?

I addressed the first issue researching the history of Atari, specifically, the series of failed marketing campaigns that lead to the company’s failure during the Video Game Crash of 1983, which lead to Atari’s various video game accomplishments being scattered to the ends of the Earth thus making them such rare collector’s items.

I addressed the second issue by researching how other video game archives and collectors preserved their games (12) as well as the American Archival Process (38) in general in addition to the guidelines given to me by the regular WPI Archivists.

Throughout the rest of this paper, I will be discussing the methods I used to determine which items of historical significance our collection lacked, the data I recorded while toiling away within the bowels of the WPI library and the extra research I did online from comparable archive collections throughout the web so that our humble library can make the most informed decisions about archival rules. However, one of the biggest conflicts that I ran into while preparing this IQP was weighing the archive’s goal of preserving the games and peripherals in the library against the needs of students both present and future to experience these games the way the designers had intended, and by the end of this IQP paper I expect that a proper conclusion shall be reached.
2. RESEARCH PROCESS

The research process for the Atari Archive has been a combination of electronic and written sources of information. Aside from my own private research, a majority of this project and the research associated with it took place in the Basement of the Gordon Library.

Of course, I would be remiss to discuss these buildings without also discussing the staff that rely on them now and will continue to do so after I graduate. In particular, I had weekly meetings with Professor O’Donnell, my project advisor, to discuss the best course of action for my IQP. Each week we would set up an agenda for the project so that I made gradual progress. As a lifelong Atari fan himself, you could definitely determine his passion for the subject.

In order to determine the most popular Atari Games of all time, I took an aggregate of multiple top twenty lists from a variety of internet sources, including Entertainment Magazines(9), Technology Magazines (5), and Databases(2). From those lists, I tallied the games that appeared most frequently in those lists and ranked them based on said frequency. Additionally, I spent time in the library archive personally appraising the condition of the cartridges, checking for discoloration, tears, and dislodged components. Due to the delicate nature of the Atari games and components, our library required a set of guidelines for the proper handling of Atari materials. However, I lacked experience in proper archival protocol, so I also had to read and take notes on “Selecting and Appraising: Archives and Manuscripts” By Frank Bores. The guidelines that were given to me during the research sessions in the library were easy to follow but thorough. I had to personally inspect each Atari cartridge for blemishes, tears, and other forms of damage. Most of the games were in working condition, but many lacked the
proper peripherals for play. For example, *Blackjack*, *Backgammon*, *Street Racer*, and *Video Olympics* require paddle controllers. The game titles that specifically required the traditional Atari joystick controllers are *Chopper Command*, *Combat*, and *Defender*. The only game that appeared to be inoperable was the *Miss Pac-Man* game which appeared to have some sort of puncture in the cartridge. The *Flight Simulator* game, though the game’s chip was undamaged, was missing the “prongs” necessary for securing it into an Atari console. The rest of the games had purely cosmetic flaws. I recommend that these games are the ones that are available for play while their more pristine counterparts are shelved for archival purposes.
3. DOWNFALL OF ATARI

Atari (named after the declaration one makes when an opponent is in immediate danger of losing a game of GO)(13) was founded in California on June 27th, 1972 by Nolan Bushnell and Ted Dabney. Atari operated independently until the video game crash of 1983(11).

FIGURE 2: FORMER ATARI HQ, 1265 BORREGAS AVENUE, SUNNYVALE, CA

If I were to attribute one vice that lead to Atari’s downfall, I would suggest that vice would be hubris. Like the Heroes of Greek Tragedy, mostly in the form of ludicrously expensive marketing blunders such as the infamous ET game and the aborted Sword Quest promotion.

ET the Game, the codifier for video game adaptations of major motion pictures, was an attempt by Atari to cash in on the success of the 1982 summer blockbuster of the same name. Why not? Atari had previously made a killing off of another Spielberg movie tie-in game, Indiana Jones so why would this film be any different? Unfortunately, Atari’s lawyers weren’t able to wrangle the licensing rights until July, giving the sole developer, Howard Scott Warshaw,
less than a month and a half to complete the game before the coveted holiday release date. Regrettably, the rushed release shows in the final product, as Warshaw failed to perform the necessary Bug Testing himself and the Focus Group Testing was sidelined due to deadline issues (26). Either of these safeguards might have caught a major bug where the player could get trapped in the various pitfalls where the components of ET’s “phone” were hidden. (31)

Overall, a combination of buggy gameplay, poor instructions, and uninspired design, spelled doom for the ET Game. Professor O'Donnell actually implored me to play a copy of the game myself and I can personally attest to the difficult and unresponsive nature of the game’s control scheme. Repeatedly I found myself falling into the same pitfall traps over and over again, and my diabetic grandfather had a better reaction speed than this hunk of junk. However, my pride as a completionist was on the line, so I frequently asked Professor O'Donnell for tips and tricks on how to play the game. This ended up not helping in the slightest as I frequently confused the character sprite for Elliot with that of the FBI Agents and Scientists that prowled the woods of Califronia. With the benefit of hindsight, an instruction manual for ET would have elevated the game from a frustrating unresponsive mess to a tedious exercise in futility. As demonstrated in the pictures I took of WPI’s Atari Collection Boxes, there is a lack of manuals or guidelines of any sort, a massive oversight that I corrected by assembling a Google Drive filled with Atari Instruction Manuals in PDF Form. Why try to reinvent the wheel when we already have the blueprints floating around in cyberspace?(25)
The most bizarre part of this Tragedy is its legendary conclusion. Atari had nearly 800,000 Unsold Copies of ET the Game buried under the town of Alamogordo. Over the years, the ET burial site became the stuff of myth (11). However, only 1,300 cartridges were unearthed in the April of 2014. If such a landmark blockbuster game like this could become a modern urban legend, what does that mean for the fate of Atari Games whose popularity (or infamy as it were) didn’t survive the 1980s? I’ve always believed that the worst fate that could befall a film is being considered “mediocre”, and I believe video games are no different in that regard. Everybody remembers Kennedy and Nixon, nobody remembers Gerald Ford.
A more obscure, yet by no means less relevant contributor to Atari’s downfall is the Swordquest Contest. Swordquest was intended to be a series of four games (Earth World, Fire World, Water World, and Air World) (28). The goal of each game was to collect items based on some aspect of religion or mythology (Zodiac, Kaballah, Chakra, and Taoism) and arrange them in such a way as to reveal a clue, which would direct the player to a page in a tie-in comic.
detailing the adventures of the protagonists, Tarra and Torr and their crusade against the vile King Tyrannus (29). Solving the riddle in the comic and mailing it to Atari would allow the player to participate in a championship round where they would play an enhanced version of the base game at a tournament and complete it within an allotted time. The winner of this contest would receive one of four prizes based on the world they completed, a Jeweled Talisman of Truth, a Diamond Chalice of Light, a Crown of Life, or a Philosopher’s Stone, each valued at $25,000 (30). The individual who managed to win all four tournaments would be granted a Solid Gold Sword of Sorcery.

However, only the Talisman and Chalice were ever awarded because the Video Game crash of 1983 forced Atari to prematurely cancel the tournament when they were sold to Warner Entertainment. Once again, a grandiose marketing campaign by Atari ended up backfiring horribly and the mismanagement of funds lead to their gaming division being sold by Warner to Tramiel Technology for nearly a quarter billion dollars in 1984 (31) thus ending Atari’s reign as the “King of Consoles.”
4. CLEANING INSTRUCTIONS

FIGURE 5: RECOMMENDED CLEANING SUPPLIES FOR ATARI GAMES

In order to maintain a collection of Atari Games, you are going to need the Cartridges themselves, Q-Tips, Hand Sanitizer Wipes (I used the “Wet Wipes” brand, but I’m sure comparable Hand Sanitizer Wipes work as well) and good ol-fashioned tissues to wipe the entire thing down afterwards to dry. (14, 16. 17)

1. Use a Dry Q-Tip to remove dust around the Port/Chip of the Atari Cartridge.
2. Wet the OTHER end of the Q-Tip with the Hand Sanitizer wipe.

3. Use the Wet Q-Tip to scrub the areas around the Port/Chip of the Atari Cartridge.

4. Wrap Dry Tissue around the Q-Tip to dry the Cartridges after one final sweep.

For Joystick repair (33-35) you need the Joysticks, a Phillip’s Head Screwdriver, a Razor, Q-Tips, Rubbing Alcohol, and some packing tape.

1. Unscrew the Joypad.

2. Use the Razor to cut the film around the “contacts” (metal plates over the circuit board).

3. Clean the contacts with a Q-Tip dipped in Rubbing Alcohol.

4. Place the contacts back on the circuit board and replace the film with packing tape.

5. Re-Screw the Joypad

FIGURE 6: ATARI JOYSTICK COLLECTION
5. INTAKE RULES

WPI ATARI COLLECTION POLICIES

FIGURE 7: ATARI VIDEO GAME BOX #4

1. **Definition and Scope:** We need three types of records, as recommended by *The Museum Archives Guideline* (37)

   a. **Organizational Records:** I recommend a ledger where players have to sign out games that they want to play as well as make appointments for using the recreational Atari Console.

   b. **Collection Records:** Like Appendix B, which catalogue every game and tool in the WPI Library Collection.
c. Acquired Materials Records: Physical documents such as instruction manuals, advertisements, and cleaning guides that will provide advice to future archivists.

1. Mission Statement: The Goal of the WPI Library Atari Collection is to collect two sets of Atari games and peripherals, one for archival purposes, the other for recreational purposes.

3. Status of the Archives: Not much needs to be changed here since we already have dedicated archivists.

4. Professional Archivists: Currently Michael Kemezis and Jessica Colati hold this position, although replacements will have to be chosen when they move on.

5. Museum Records and Personal Papers: All notes written by Archivists are considered Museum Records. Notes written by students are considered Personal Papers.

6. Acquisition Policy for Collected Materials: First and foremost we need two sets of every console, peripheral, and game, one archival, and one playable at any given time.

   ● A=Archival.
   ● L=Loan

1. At any given time we need a registry of which games we have and which games we don’t have so that anyone can check out Atari Games from the Library Computers.

2. We also need a grading system for the physical condition. (16, 17, 18)

   ● M=MINT, Games that are in prime physical condition (fresh out of the box.)
   ● G=Good, Games that have slight discoloration.
   ● F=Fair, Games that are yellowed or have splotches, but work properly.
   ● P=Poor, Games that need to be repaired.

7. Criteria for Retention of Museum Records:
A. Evidence of the structure, development, mission and functions of the museum over time.

B. Documentation of the actions, decisions, policies, and fiscal and legal rights and responsibilities of the museum.

C. Research and informational value.

8: Current Records: The guidance of Archivists should be sought in all situations where Archival Policy is changed. Additionally, only two sets of documentation, artifacts, miscellanea should be allowed in the archives at any given time, Archival and Recreational.

9. Location and Conditions

1. The archives should be located in a separate and secure area with adequate protection against fire, flood, vermin, theft, and other hazards.

2. Temperature, light, and humidity should be controlled at appropriate and stable levels to ensure the preservation of materials. Certain records may have special environmental requirements.

3. To prevent flood damage, archives should not be placed below ground level.

4. If neither suitable accommodation nor adequate staff can be provided on-site for the archives, the institution should consider:

   1. Placing its records in the archives of its parent institution if applicable or in a nearby archival repository willing to administer them on a continuing basis.

   2. Forming or joining a consortium whereby several institutions cooperate to ensure that their archives receive adequate care.

   3. Contributing to cost in the above choices.
10. Arrangement, Description, and Preservation of the Records

1. The archivist organizes records in keeping with the professional principles of provenance and the sanctity of original order whenever possible.

2. The archivist produces written descriptive inventories, guides and other finding aids in accordance with accepted archival standards and makes them generally available.

3. The archivist implements basic preservation measures such as the use of archival-quality containers.

11. Access Rules:

1. Potential players may only handle materials designated as “Recreational” in the Recreation Room and can’t take any materials out of the Gordon Library Basement under risk of having their Atari privileges revoked.

2. Archival materials can only be handled with the permission of the archivists with the recommended gloves. Failure to follow these guidelines will also result in the revocation of Atari privileges.
CONCLUSION

In order to prevent video game history from being lost in the ever rushing tide of history, it is of utmost importance that we collect and preserve Atari artifacts in the Gordon Library. Though many of today’s and tomorrow’s WPI students grew up with the console triumvirate of Playstation, Xbox, and Nintendo, this does not mean we should not make an effort to preserve the consoles of yesteryear. Even though Atari was brought down by a series of extremely expensive advertising blunders, such as ET and Swordquest, these failures can still serve as cautionary tales for future game developers. Additionally, future archivists need guidelines in order to maintain an optimal collection, and, should the worst happen, replace components than can not be repaired. Finally, I have created some ground rules for sharing Atari games with students that are interested in experiencing the infancy of console gaming firsthand so that they may appreciate the work of the giants whose shoulders they stand upon.

FIGURE 8: ATARI CART
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May 2017.


1. ADVENTURE  
2. AIR-SEA BATTLE  
3. ALPHA BEAM WITH ERNIE  
4. ASTEROIDS  
5. ATARI VIDEO CUBE (RUBIK'S CUBE)  
6. BACKGAMMON  
7. BASIC MATH (FUN WITH NUMBERS)  
8. BASIC PROGRAMMING  
9. BASKETBALL  
10. BATTLEZONE  
11. BERZERK  
12. BIG BIRD'S EGG CATCH  
13. BLACKJACK  
14. BOWLING  
15. BRAIN GAMES  
16. BREAKOUT  
17. CANYON BOMBER  
18. CASINO  
19. CENTIPEDE  
20. CHAMPIONSHIP SOCCER (PELE'S SOCCER)  
21. CIRCUS ATARI  
22. CODEBREAKER  
23. COMBAT  
24. COOKIE MONSTER CRUNCH  
25. CROSSBOW  
26. CREATURE CAPTURE (FUN WITH NUMBERS)  
27. CRUSADERS  
28. CRUSADERS II  
29. CRYSTAL CASTLES  
30. DARK CHAMBERS  
31. DARK STRIKE  
32. DIG DUG  
33. DODGE 'EM  
34. DOUBLE DUNK  
35. E.T. THE EXTRA TERRESTRIAL  
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39. GAME OF CONCENTRATION (HUNT & SCORE)  
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81. REAL SPORTS FOOTBALL  
82. REAL SPORTS SOCCER  
83. REAL SPORTS TENNIS  
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85. ROAD RUNNER  
86. SECRET QUEST  
87. SENTINEL  
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89. SLOT MACHINE  
90. SLOT RACERS  
91. SNOWY AND THE RED BARON  
92. SOLARIS  
93. SORCERER'S APPRENTICE  
94. SPACE INVADERS  
95. SPACE WAR  
96. SPINTMASTER  
97. STAR RAIDERS  
98. STAR SHIP  
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106. SWORDQUEST EARTHWORLD  
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175. RIDDLE OF THE SPHINX  
176. SHOOTIN' GALLERY  
177. SOLAR SHUTTLE  
178. STRING SHUTTLE  
179. SUBTERRANEA  
180. TRICK SHOT
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320. CHALLENGE OF NEXAR
321. CHASE THE CHUCK WAGON
322. CHINA SYNDROME
323. CROSS FORCE
324. GANGSTER ALLEY
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ABSOLUTE ENTERTAINMENT

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<td>468</td>
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<td>MAZY MATCH (UNKNOWN DATATECH GAME 2)</td>
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APPENDIX B - CURRENT WPI ATARI COLLECTION (Ungraded)

2 Original Atari Video Game Consoles with 4 of the original joystick controllers.
2 Original joystick Controllers, 2 TAC-2 Totally Accurate controllers, 1 Red Command Controller, Atari 5200 Series Controller, 2 Pong Paddle Controllers, a TV/Antenna Converter, Power Converter.
Air Sea Battle,
Asteroids (2)
Backgammon
Battlezone
Berzerk (2)
Big Bird’s Egg Catch
Breakout
Casino
Cookie Monster Munch
Chopper Command
Combat, Defender
Donkey Kong
ET
Frogger
Haunted House
Sneak and Peek
Surround
Street Racer
Video Chess
World Zapper
Towering Inferno
Football
Stampede
Raiders of the Lost Ark
Miss Pac-Man
Trick Shot
River Raid
Seaquest
Missile Command
Video Pinball
Video Olympics
Yars’ Revenge
Laser Blast
Maze Craze
Pole Position
Outlaw
Moon Patrol
Star Master
Star Raiders
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