



Vintage Games

An Insider Look at the History of Grand Theft Auto,
Super Mario, and the Most Influential Games of All Time



Bill Loguidice Matt Barton



“Loguidice and Barton prove that excellent research and technical accuracy can make for delightfully easy and fun reading. *Vintage Games* takes us through gaming’s evolution one exemplary game at a time. Charting the history of dance and music games with the first *Dance Dance Revolution*; Roberta Williams’ game design work as it leads up to *King’s Quest* and *King’s Quest’s* place within the history of adventure gaming and even within Sierra’s game guide market; and the place of many other games as articulated within the overall gaming history.”

“While some of these titles won’t seem old enough to be ‘vintage’ to seasoned players, these games are like good wine—their vintage is one of quality as it relates to a particular place in history. Not only are the games featured in *Vintage Games* historically important for the qualities they possess, so too is writing like that by Loguidice and Barton. The pair has written extensively on games and gaming history, most notably for *Armchair Arcade*, and their writing time and again shows that quality writing crosses normal boundaries, engaging scholars, fans, and even casual readers.”

—Laurie N. Taylor, Digital Library Center, University of Florida

“I’ve seen dozens of video gaming books over the years, but rarely do you find one that is almost as fun to read as the games they talk about. Historically accurate, written with an obvious passion that never leaves the reader feeling left out or belittled. A must-read for anyone even remotely interested in video gaming history—from the hardcore to the casual, this is a book that anyone that has ever held a joystick would enjoy. *Vintage Games* is highly recommended to my listeners.”

—Shane R. Monroe, Host of RetroGaming Radio/Monroeworld.com

“While calling games from the last two decades of the twentieth century ‘vintage’ might not sit well with thirty-something gamers, in so doing Barton and Loguidice remind us (through superb detail and smart, conversational prose) of the enormously rich history that games have already enjoyed and the rapidity with which they have reached the very core of popular culture. Barton and Loguidice will please scholars with their comprehensive research and excellent detail, but *Vintage Games* doesn’t feel ‘researched’: the authors’ love of the games is also clearly apparent. And that makes for a thoroughly enjoyable read. The book is smart and fun—much like the games it addresses.”

—Dr. Matthew S. S. Johnson, Southern Illinois University Edwardsville

“They say you can’t go back again, but reading *Vintage Games* comes close. Open the book, and I’m back in the video arcades of my youth. Turn the page, and I’m in college again, discovering the secret joys of the early PC games. Turn the page again, and I’m back in my living room, playing *Mario* with my young kids. But *Vintage Games* is more than just a trip down memory lane, because the authors analyze each game in ways that bring fresh insights to those nostalgic memories.”

—Steve Meretzky, Veteran Game Designer

“An interesting and insightful trip down a gamer’s memory lane, focusing on titles that have become benchmarks in videogame history.”

—Didi Cardoso, Managing Editor, Grrlgamer.com

“The videogame industry has a poor track record when it comes to preserving its history. Fortunately, scholars and enthusiasts have stepped in to fill the void, and *Vintage Games* is an essential contribution to this effort. Loguidice and Barton are to be commended for documenting the history of gaming’s greatest landmarks.”

—Michael Abbott, The Brainy Gamer Blog and Podcast and Professor of Theater and Film Studies, Wabash College

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VINTAGE GAMES

An Insider Look at the
History of *Grand Theft Auto*,
Super Mario, and the Most
Influential Games of All Time

BILL LOGUIDICE
MATT BARTON



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PARIS • SAN DIEGO • SAN FRANCISCO • SINGAPORE • SYDNEY • TOKYO

Focal Press is an imprint of Elsevier



Focal Press is an imprint of Elsevier
30 Corporate Drive, Suite 400, Burlington, MA 01803, USA
Linacre House, Jordan Hill, Oxford OX2 8DP, UK

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Loguidice, Bill.

Vintage games : an insider look at the history of Grand Theft Auto, Super Mario, and the most influential games of all time / Bill Loguidice, Matt Barton.

p. cm.

Includes index.

ISBN 978-0-240-81146-8 (pbk. : alk. paper) 1. Video games—History. I. Barton, Matt. II. Title.

GV1469.3.L64 2009

794.8—dc22

2008048031

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: 978-0-240-81146-8

For information on all Focal Press publications
visit our website at www.books.elsevier.com

Typeset by diacriTech, Chennai, India

12 13 5 4 3 2

Printed in China

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Pinball Construction Set (1982): Launching Millions of Creative Possibilities

Pong (1972): Avoid Missing Game to Start Industry

Robotron: 2084 (1982): Running Away while Defending Humanoids

Rogue (1980): Have @ You, You Deadly Z's

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Star Raiders (1979): The New Hope

Tony Hawk's Pro Skater (1999): Videogame Ollies, Grabs and Grinds

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Preface

This book is about vintage games—or, more specifically, the vintage games that have had the most potent influences on both the videogame industry and the culture that supports it. These are the paradigm shifters; the games that made a difference.

The word *vintage* has its origins in the wine industry, where it usually denotes wine produced during a special year—a year in which the grapes were particularly delightful. Your humble authors, both lifelong and dedicated gamers and enthusiasts, beg your indulgence: let us be your connoisseurs, your guides on a wondrous tour through the history of some of the finest games ever made. And if during your journey through these pages, you desire a sip of *Chateau Haut-Brion Pessac-Lognan* (v. 1982), we promise not to stop you. It was a good year.

Before we embark, however, you might want to know how we selected your destinations. How did we decide which games were truly the “most influential”?

When we were first asked to write this book, we were skeptical, particularly because we’ve become disenfranchised with the “best ever” lists that saturate the Internet. Major gaming websites never tire of trotting out some “top ten” this or that—yet despite so many varied attempts, not one has gotten it right. The latest over-hyped movie crossover is as likely to appear on these lists as *Pac-Man* and *Pole Position*. About the only thing these lists are good for is stirring up controversy on blogs and community sites: “What—they didn’t mention *Tunnels of Doom*? And where the heck is *Ultima*?” As is always the case, the true criteria of such lists is the whims and personal experiences of their creators. If you grew up with a TI-99/4a in the house, of course you think *Tunnels of Doom* is a great game, and we agree, but it’s only mentioned here. *Ultima* is [Chapter 23](#).

What really, then, constitutes a great game? Does it mean “a bestseller”? If so, this list would look quite different, with far more modern and far fewer vintage titles. Why? Because there are millions more gamers now than ever before, and the industry continues to expand. Even the most wretched sequel of a sequel may sell more copies than several of the games discussed in this book. Meanwhile, several of the games we discuss in this book weren’t sold at all—or at least were initially distributed for free: *Rogue*, *Spacewar!*, *Tetris*, and *Zork* all fit this description.

If not sales, perhaps “innovation” is the key to separating the vintage from the vinegar. If a game does something first, doesn’t that make it more influential than the later games that did it better? Alas, if this were so, the outline of our book would look like a Gordian Knot. As we’ll see, videogames have not followed a nice, neat linear evolution, and even the most original-seeming game had plenty of predecessors and influences, whether it was an earlier game or some other cultural phenomenon.

Even if we could prove, beyond all doubt, that a game had done something first—though important, that fact doesn’t necessarily mean it was influential. *Spacewar!* wasn’t the first videogame; it was preceded by at least two earlier and all but forgotten projects, *OXO* and *Tennis for Two*. Does that make *Spacewar!* less influential? Certainly not. The game developers who would make such a difference in the 1970s and 1980s probably had never heard of *OXO* or *Tennis for Two*, but many of them played *Spacewar!*. In short, innovation alone doesn’t suffice to make a game influential; it also requires exposure and recognition. Why dote on an old clunker like Vectorbeam’s *Warrior* (1979) when it’s obvious to everyone that Capcom’s *Street Fighter II* (1991) is the fighting game that defined (and continues to define) the fighting genre?

Neither is novelty a reliable sounding board. If we shared this view, we'd be talking primarily about titles like Atari's *Tempest* (1981; Arcade), Namco's *Dig Dug* (1982; Arcade), Datasoft's *Mancospter* (1984; Commodore 64), or Nintendo's *Kirby: Canvas Curse* (2005; Nintendo DS), each examples of brilliant games with unique features. Are these great games? Sure. Did they inspire hundreds—if not thousands—of clones and derivatives? No.

The games chosen in this book represent every significant genre. Readers who are disappointed to find that their favorite game didn't receive its own chapter might still find it referenced and described in the context of a game that did. We make no claims, however, to offering anything like a comprehensive listing of all videogames, which would be about as much fun as reading a dictionary. The book's main focus is to provide a concise yet detailed overview of an influential game, its antecedents, and its predecessors. We might also warn readers that we have not let our recognition of these games restrain our criticism of their weaknesses.

Who is this book for? Clearly, it's for anyone with a passion for videogaming, but most particularly those who enjoy learning the history of their favorite pastime. It's also sure to be useful for both experienced and aspiring game designers. There is probably no better way to learn the 50+-year history of videogames than to read about (and hopefully play) the greatest and most influential games of all time. Such experience benefits both designers and players, who may be surprised at the depth and diversity of our gaming heritage. Designers should know what's been done before, what's worked, and what hasn't worked. These pages offer an endless source of inspiration for a developer longing to create the next great game. As a player, it's important to have a respect for the past, not just callously dismissing everything before the current generation as obsolete. Besides leaving the gamer woefully ignorant and even naive, such an attitude leads to the boring sameness we currently find so much of in the industry. Read this book, and let us know if you still think every new game has to be a sequel of a sequel. If nothing else, this book should raise your expectations about what developers are truly capable of producing.

Does the world really need another compilation of the best games ever—even if it is, for the sake of argument, one hell of a fine read? Because our experiences and palates are so very distinct, what does “best” or “greatest” really mean anyway? There are few objective criteria that we can bring to bear on the matter. What we can bring, though, is our own extensive experience playing, studying, writing about, and discussing thousands upon thousands of games from all eras and all platforms. Whether we're talking arcades, consoles, computers, handhelds, or mainframes—if it's a game, we've probably played it. If we say a game is great, it is not because it is great compared to the games of the previous few years, or even the past few decades, but because it is great, period. Plus, we really like these games.

We decided to take this project on as a challenge—a challenge not only to pick a truly representative list of the greatest and most influential games of *all* time—not just from the period when *we* first started playing games—but to truly add something useful to the often-haphazard videogame literature out there. These may not have been the bestselling or even most memorable games, but each of these carefully chosen titles in their own special way changed videogames forever. In addition to discussing the games themselves, we'll also direct your attention to other critically important titles that either influenced or were influenced by them. If you find yourself convinced by this book to seek out the many forgotten gems of game history, drop us a postcard (or at least an email!) at Armchair Arcade.

Now sit back and let the videogames begin!

Acknowledgments

Bill Loguidice

I'd like to thank literary agent Matt Wagner, Focal Press representatives Chris Simpson and Anaïs Wheeler, and technical editor Alexandra (Alyx) Hall, for all of their help before and during production of this book. Of course, I can't forget my co-author and friend, Matt Barton, whose talent and drive help to keep me on my toes. There's no one I'd trust to partner with on challenges like this book more. I'd also like to thank fellow Armchair Arcade editor Mark Vergeer for providing comments and supplying us with the invader images for our cover, and a whole range of our members and friends for their input during the writing of this book, including "Rowdy Rob," "Calibrator," "yakumo9275" (Stu), "CkRtech," "steve," and "davyK." The discussions with you guys were a big help! Finally, I'd like to thank my family for being there for me through all the trials and tribulations, especially my wife Christina, who was a huge help with the book, particularly with the *Super Mario Bros.* and *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater* chapters, and my daughters, Amelie and Olivia. I love you all more than anything!

Matt Barton

I'd like to thank everyone at Armchair Arcade for their support and assistance during this project. I also appreciate Simon Carless and Christian Nutt of Gamasutra for recommending our great reviewer, Alyx, who has been a great help. I'm also indebted to my colleagues Patty Rimmell and Dennis Jerz, who helped with *The Sims* and *Zork* chapters, respectively. Of course, no one has done more to make this project than my long-time collaborator and friend Bill Loguidice. It seems like only yesterday when Bill and I were writing those lengthy posts on the forums of RetroGaming Radio!

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ALONE IN THE DARK (1992): THE POLYGONS OF FEAR

When most people think of survival horror, they think of Capcom's *Resident Evil* series, which debuted in 1996 and sold nearly 35 million copies in just over 10 years.¹ However, the conventions of Capcom's survival horror games, as well as others like *Silent Hill* (Konami, starting 1999), owe much of their success to Infogrames' *Alone in the Dark*, a PC game released in 1992.



Part of the opening cut scene from *Alone in the Dark*, showing female protagonist Emily Hartwood approaching the mysterious Derceto mansion.

Alone in the Dark, designed principally by Frederick Raynal and Franck de Girolami, is an early blend of 2D and 3D technology; specifically, of software-based 3D polygons for characters and items, and prerendered 2D images for backgrounds. This hybrid engine allowed characters and items to be rendered (redrawn)

¹March 4, 2008, Capcom Co. Ltd., press release.

on the fly and free to move to and from any position, whereas the environments or rooms could be shown only from a certain fixed camera angle that was dependent upon the player character's location. The technique allowed for dramatic, predetermined camera angles, but also meant that the player didn't always have a clear view of the action. Arguably, this feature made the engine work well for horror, as such camera angles are a quintessential aspect of most horror films—you know something is around the corner, but can't make it out until it is too late.

Although the 3D graphics of *Alone in the Dark* were crude and blocky by today's standards, with flat-shaded rather than textured polygons, they were remarkable for their time. Combined with superb atmospheric sound effects and a rich soundtrack, the overall presentation created a potent feeling sense of horror.

Because this was an early software-based 3D engine, it does not move as quickly as gamers might expect. However, the development team was able to turn this potential liability to their advantage—the slowness of some of the in-game actions heightens the sense of panic when the character is about to be attacked; direct or impending attack: it's like the nightmare in which you can't run fast enough to get away from the monster. In fact, the designers took this one step further by slowing down the player character even further when hurt, a realistic touch that few other games share.

Of course, *Alone in the Dark* was certainly not the first graphic action adventure or even the first horror-themed adventure. As far back as Atari's 1981 *Haunted House* for the Atari 2600 Video Computer System (VCS), action, adventure, and horror were logical combinations.

If *Haunted House* looks a lot like Atari's classic *Adventure* (1979), it's no coincidence—it's based on the same engine. Shown are the eyes that represent the protagonist and a bat.



In *Haunted House*, the player's avatar is a pair of eyes floating about a darkened mansion. The player's goal is to find the pieces of a magic urn and escape, all the while avoiding tarantulas, bats, and a ghost. Clever use of simple sound effects for actions like walking up and down stairs, wind blowing, and doors shutting help set the mood, and the visuals are blocky but still easy to identify. Although the programming effort that went into *Haunted House* was masterful, the VCS just wasn't powerful enough to set a truly horrific mood.

Other attempts at horror videogames on the VCS would follow, like Wizard Video's *Halloween* (1983), based on the popular 1978 slasher film. The player assumes the role of a babysitter in a two-story house, and scores points by escorting children to safe rooms or stabbing the killer with a kitchen knife. Michael Myers, the famous antagonist from the film, is also the killer in the game, and pursues the player in his iconically slow but relentless manner. Again, although the visuals and sound were pretty much what was expected on the platform at the time, the system's capabilities limited how terrifying the game could actually be. Other than the tension sparked by Michael Myers' appearances, there was little to genuinely frighten the player.

Other platforms, like Mattel's Intellivision, also witnessed pioneering attempts at what would become the survival horror genre. Imagic's 1982 *Dracula* puts a slight twist on the standard formula by casting the player as the titular vampire. The vampire has the ability to transform into a bat and must stalk and bite a certain number of victims and return to his resting place before sunrise. Antagonists include wolves, vultures, and stake-throwing constables. Although the Intellivision had greater technical capabilities than the VCS and *Dracula's* presentation was fairly well done for the time, there was also nothing particularly scary about the game other than the system's controllers.

Even the arcade had its fair share of horror-themed games, like the gory and sadistic light gun shooter from Exidy, *Chiller* (1986), which tasked the player with shooting everything on screen, including humans chained and tortured in a dungeon. With more realistic graphics and sound, the game might have actually achieved more than mere revulsion.

The closest that the arcade came to something like survival horror was the visually rich *Splatterhouse* (1988), a side scrolling beat 'em up from Namco. The game casts the player as Rick, who must rescue his girlfriend held captive in yet another apparently abandoned, creepy, demonic mansion. Luckily for the player, an evil hockey-like mask attaches itself to Rick's face and gives him super strength, with which he battles the ghouls and demons throughout the house. Despite having many home translations

and sequels, including a 2009 home console remake from Namco Bandai Games for the Microsoft Xbox 360 and Sony PlayStation 3, the *Splatterhouse* series remains firmly in the horror action category, with little apparent influence on or from other horror-themed games.



The only obvious way *Splatterhouse* relates to *Alone in the Dark* is that the in-game mansion is supposedly that of Dr. Herbert West, H. P. Lovecraft's "Reanimator."

There is little to indicate that any of these earlier games or the myriad other titles that failed to deliver videogame scares for predominantly technical reasons, like Avalon Hill's *Maxwell Manor* (1984; Apple II, Atari 8-bit, Commodore 64) or LJN's *Friday the 13th* (1988, Nintendo Entertainment System), had any influence on *Alone in the Dark's* design. Instead, American author and horror icon, Howard Phillips Lovecraft (1890–1937), better known as H. P. Lovecraft, with his famed Cthulhu Mythos, was the credited inspiration for the final product, right down to the tagline: "A Virtual Adventure Game Inspired by the Work of H. P. Lovecraft" on the front of the box. However, Raynal was also inspired by zombie movies. In an August 3, 2006, *Adventure Europe* interview, Raynal stated, "Romero's *Zombie* can be considered as my first inspiration. Since that movie, I [have] wanted to make a game where you need to fight against zombies, add to this the atmosphere from a lot of horror movies, which I found very entertaining, especially those where you are alone against the environment and your only goal is to survive. ... So Cthulhu wasn't the main

influence, but as I wanted the player to read texts to find clues, we used Cthulhu for its atmosphere and to add a few monsters.”²

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MAXWELL MANOR

The back of the box for *Maxwell Manor*. Creepy mansions and haunted houses have been videogame staples for the 35+-year history of mainstream videogames.

However, this does not mean that there were no games that influenced *Alone in the Dark's* development. In fact, in that same *Adventure Europe* interview, Raynal states that it was his own work on porting Christophe de Dinechin's little-known but

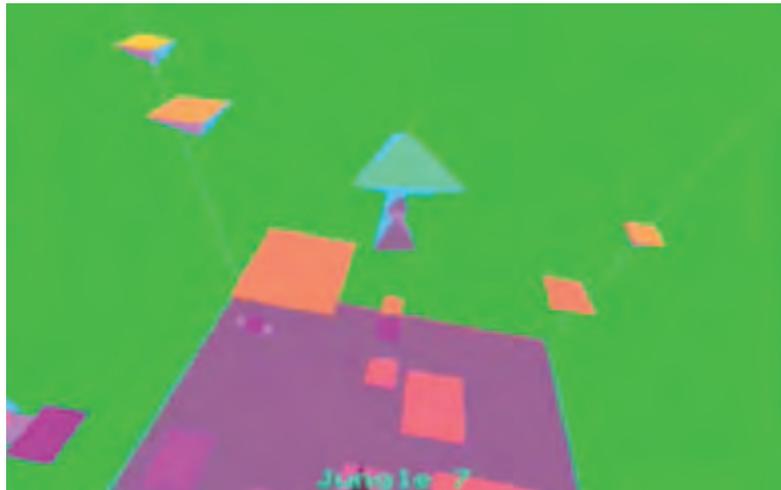
²http://www.adventure-eu.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=207&Itemid=29.

groundbreaking *Alpha Waves* (1990, Atari ST) to the PC that was one of the game's biggest influences.

Alpha Waves, one of the first 3D home videogames, was a surprisingly robust software-driven, polygon-based platform jumping and exploration title that featured simple shapes and multiobject interactions. A quick glance at the game in motion is enough to see how influential it was on the implementation and design of *Alone in the Dark*. As Raynal described:

When I was making the PC conversion of *Alpha Waves*, a very primitive 3D game, I had the feeling that it was time for 3D to offer something new to gameplay; I was convinced that it was possible to create a new animation system for human characters (angles interpolation in real time), then everything became obvious in less than three seconds, a man in a house, zombies, my old dream at least possible? But I knew that it was not possible at this time to have realistic 3D backgrounds needed to give the player the feeling that he is trapped in a real haunted manor. So I came out with the idea of 3D bitmapped backgrounds. In the beginning, I thought I could use digitalized photos of a real manor but hand drawn pictures came out to be better for characters' integration and ambiance. Then I had to program all those 3D tools to make it happen as nothing existed for real time 3D at this time.

Screenshot from *Alpha Waves*, which was a major influence for Frederick Raynal in the implementation of *Alone in the Dark*. The triangular blue object casting a black shadow is the player, and the floating orange objects are the platforms. Similar jumping-centric 3D platforming elements would appear again in other 3D games like *Jumping Flash!* (SCE, 1995; Sony PlayStation) and *Montezuma's Return* (WizardWorks, 1998; PC).



Alone in the Dark is set in 1925. The action takes place in Derceto, a Louisiana mansion owned by the late Jeremy Hartwood, who apparently committed suicide after being haunted by a strange presence. Before passing, Hartwood translated many of

the ancient manuscripts found within the house. The player must investigate the mansion, and has a choice of two avatars: a mustachioed private detective, Edward Carnby, who was sent to find a piano for an antique dealer, or Jeremy's niece, Emily Hartwood, who wants to find the piano for a possible hidden clue to her uncle's suicide. The choice makes little difference to the story, but does affect the look of the player's character.

As the game loads, a rendered Infogrames armadillo mascot spins, followed by the image of a book that is turned to reveal credits. After answering a copy protection question from the manual, the player is asked to choose either Emily on the left, or Edward on the right, where a picture of the chosen character alongside some introductory text is then displayed while ominous music plays. Once the introductory text is finished, the scene shifts via an in-engine cut scene to the player's character being driven in a jalopy, speeding up a dirt road leading to the mansion. This sequence gives an initial sense of the game's third-person perspective presentation, with a rendered car and passengers in richly prerendered environments that change perspective at key points. Once the character gets out at the front gate he or she starts to walk the rest of the way to the mansion, demonstrating the nice walking animation; movement point interpolation is a key feature of the game engine. The camera angle changes again, this time to the perspective of the eyes of a mysterious creature looking down at the character from a window, with only its hands showing, as the car drives off.

Once the character enters the mansion, the front doors quickly close, offering no escape for the startled character, who now has no choice but to continue on. The player takes control of the avatar's actions only after he or she reaches the attic, ratcheting up the tension and giving the player a small tour of the mansion on the way. The sequences also introduces the abrupt changes in camera angle as the character steps into certain predetermined points.

Although the animation is excellent (if somewhat deliberate) and the environments are well drawn, the characters are noticeably blocky (and in the case of Emily, "pointy"), consisting of a minimal number of flat-shaded polygons. Nevertheless, with clever use of color and clear distinctions between body parts and clothing, the characters are at least identifiable and work well within the game's carefully orchestrated art direction.

Once the character reaches the attic, players learn (often after a few restarts) that they must figure out how to block the trap door and the window so monsters can't make their way in, demonstrating the game's special mix of action and puzzle solving right away. By pushing a large chest over the trap door and an armoire in front of the window, the character is then free to explore the attic.

Soon enough, the player finds items in the armoire (blanket), piano (letter), chest (shotgun), and bookshelf (book). As this exploration takes place, a monster breaks the window's glass, but can't get past the armoire, while another monster tries to push up the trap door in the floor, but can't move the chest. After finding and taking an oil lamp on the table, the character can safely direct the character to an exit out a side door and down the stairs. The goal is to search for further clues about the mansion's deadly occupants and ultimately find a way out.



In this screenshot, Emily successfully covered the trap door, but failed to block the window, allowing the toothy creature to burst through.

The atmosphere is retained throughout the rest of the game with creaky doors, weakened floors, and the sudden appearance of monsters who the character may not be equipped to fight and trying to stay one step ahead of the monsters—which the character isn't always equipped to fight. This is a mix that few games before or since, including the game's sequels, have been able to get quite right.

All player commands are executed from the keyboard, with the up and down arrow keys moving the avatar, and the left and right arrow keys changing direction. By tapping twice then holding the up arrow key, the player can make the avatar run (one of a handful of animation sequences in the game that doesn't look quite right). Running is a very imprecise affair and can heighten the sense of panic when trying to move the character away from danger.

Pressing the "I" or Enter/Return keys brings up the options screen, which lists inventory items, character portrait, and any active items, and possible actions. Fight, Open/Search, Shut, and Push are always available, and Jump (Hop, Jump, or Leap) is possible in certain situations. Further, certain items allow for additional commands, like Reload, Eat, Drop, and Throw. When one of

the actions is selected, the player is returned to the game to carry them out. For combat, the player can engage in hand-to-hand fighting consisting of punches and kicks, or use cutting or thrusting weapons and firearms.



In this screenshot, Edward has successfully made it down from the attic and avoided falling through the rotten floor just outside this room. After finding nothing in the armoire, he is attacked by a shuffling zombie.

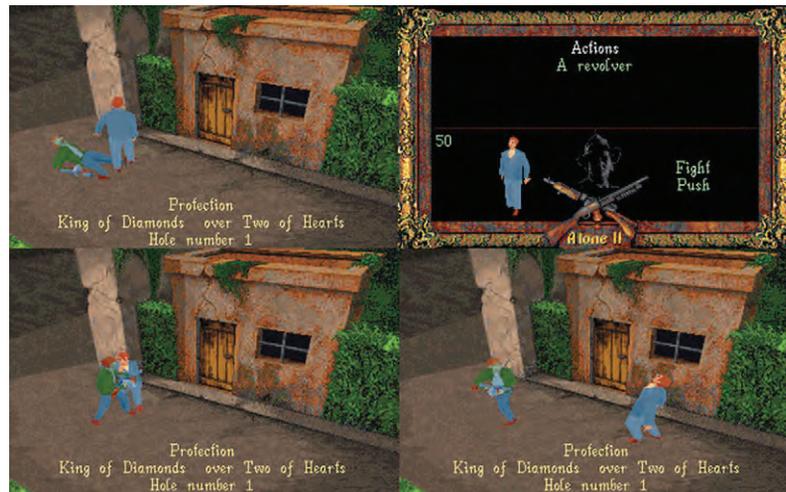
In 1993, a CD-ROM version was released for the PC that included voiceovers for the in-game text and an enhanced soundtrack, as well as a small bonus game, *Jack in the Dark*, billed as an interactive Christmas adventure, but set during Halloween, somewhat like the animated Tim Burton film from the same year, *The Nightmare Before Christmas*. The player takes the role of a young child, Grace Saunders, who enters a toy store after dark and gets locked in. She finds that the toys are alive. Her ultimate goal is to save Santa Claus from an evil jack-in-the-box. With an emphasis on puzzle solving over combat, the game is a decidedly different experience from *Alone in the Dark*, though it obviously utilizes the same engine as that game and two of its sequels. *Jack in the Dark* was also made available by itself on a single 3.5" disk and on the CD-ROM version of *Alone in the Dark 2*, where it served introduction to that game's main nemesis.

Alone in the Dark was ported to the 3DO and Apple Macintosh in 1994, with the former port making use of the standard gamepad instead of keyboard controls. *Alone in the Dark 2* was released in 1994 for the PC, 1995 for the 3DO, and 1996 for the Apple Macintosh, Sega Saturn, and Sony PlayStation, with improved visuals for the latter two platforms. Unfortunately for fans of the previous games, Raynal was no longer involved with the series. As he described in the *Adventure Europe* interview:

I didn't decide to leave the license, but Infogrames itself, because of many disagreements with them. At this time,

games were completely handled by the creator who usually was also the main programmer so I never wrote anything about game mechanics and ambiance secrets. I think they didn't understand what I did, the engine was brand new and helped the success of the game, but a game is not an engine or a movie, it's a whole system where situations and game-play are the first things to think about. There are complex links between technology, gameplay, and story, all of them always sending the ball back to each other, a game is good when the players feel this synergy.

Alone in the Dark 2 takes place at Christmas in the year 1924, where Edward Carnby (now known as the “Supernatural Private Eye”) and his partner Ted Stryker are investigating the kidnapping of Grace Saunders, leading them to another mansion, “Hell’s Kitchen,” the home of infamous gangsters. Edward learns that Ted has disappeared in the mansion and investigates, but finds his partner murdered. Edward discovers that the mobsters are merely the corporeal forms of ghost pirates, and he must make his way through the house and eventually onto a hidden pirate ship to find a way to save Grace.

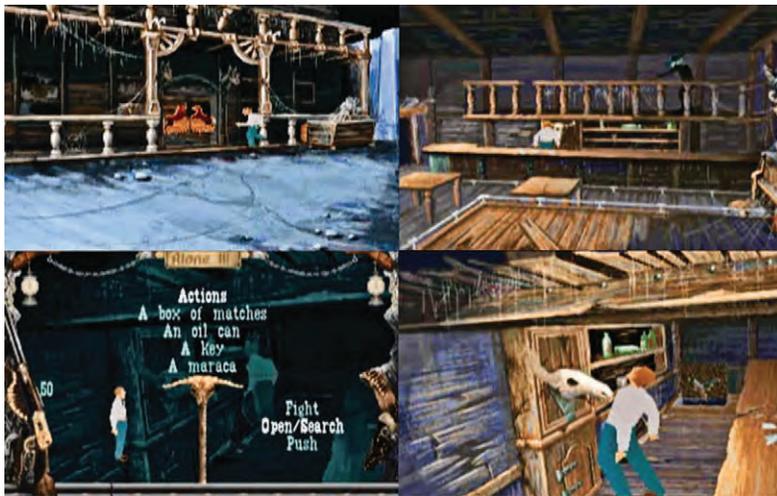


A sequence of four images from *Alone in the Dark 2*, showing from the top, left to right, an early unarmed encounter with a zombie gangster. To the chagrin of fans of the first game, the sequel was often more focused on combat than puzzle-solving exploration.

Beyond limiting the player to the initial choice of the one protagonist, the biggest differences between this sequel and the original is the downplaying of the horror theme and the emphasis on action. Interestingly, the player is occasionally asked to take the role of Grace, who—as in *Jack in the Dark*—is unable to fight, so she must sneak around and avoid direct confrontations with the gangsters, instead setting traps to defeat them. This feature brought a brief, but welcome change of pace for fans of the style of the original game.

Alone in the Dark 3 was released in 1995 for the PC, with a port to the Apple Macintosh following a year later. In the final game in the series that uses the original game engine, Edward Carnby is asked to investigate the disappearance of a film crew, one member of which is Emily Hartwood of the original game. Though the setting was different—this time a western ghost town called Slaughter Gulch, located in the Mojave Desert—the game’s developers decided to go back to the original game’s formula of more balanced action and puzzle elements.

Alone in the Dark 3 also makes a further concession to the sometimes overly challenging action sequences by allowing the player to adjust the difficulty of combat. Welcome changes from previous games are unlimited save game slots, which allow for more player experimentation, and an onscreen map that shows Edward’s exact location. The map eliminates much of the frustration from the game’s dramatic but sometimes disorienting camera angles, making it easier for the player to make progress in the large gameworld.



A collection of four scenes from *Alone in the Dark 3*, sequenced from the top, left to right. The third game was the last title in the series to use the by then creaky game engine, but it nevertheless delighted many fans of the original by placing less emphasis on combat.

Because the next entry in the series was not released until 2001, the time was ripe for many other games to take on the survival horror challenge. These included Acclaim’s time-limited *D* (1995; 3DO, PC, Sega Saturn, Sony PlayStation); Capcom’s B-movie homage, *Resident Evil* (known as *Biohazard* in Japan; 1996, Sony PlayStation), Konami’s fog-laden and sound-centered *Silent Hill* (1999, Sony PlayStation), and Tecmo’s *Fatal Frame* (known as *Project Zero* in Europe and Australia, and *Zero* in Japan; 2001, Microsoft Xbox, Sony PlayStation 2), which has the player battling ghosts by sealing their spirit in film. Of these, *Resident Evil* is the best known and has spanned the most sequels and series

offshoots, though the others, with the exception of *D* and *D2* (2000, Sega Dreamcast), have also been critical and commercial successes.

Though said to be thematically inspired by Capcom's Japan-only Nintendo Famicom role-playing game, *Sweet Home* (1989, itself based on a movie), including the mansion setting, puzzles, and loading screen when opening doors, *Resident Evil* is in many ways a reimagining of the original *Alone in the Dark*. For instance, the player has a choice between two characters—one male, one female, each with a different backstory, the backgrounds are pre-rendered and the camera angles fixed, and character and creature movements are deliberate, with somewhat sluggish control. Further, many of the same surprises take place, such as monsters bursting through windows and startling the player. Naturally, in the span of four years, the visuals are significantly better and there are now numerous cheesy cut scenes to advance the story, with awkwardly translated and badly voiced dialog, including the infamous line, "Jill, here's a lockpick. It might be handy if you, the master of unlocking, take it with you."

In an attempt to cash in on the success of the *Resident Evil* series, Infogrames released the fourth game in the *Alone in the Dark* series in 2001 for the Nintendo Game Boy Color, PC, Sega Dreamcast, and Sony PlayStation. In *Alone in the Dark: The New Nightmare*, Edward Carnby is reimagined in a different timeline (the year is 2001), and as a darker and more sarcastic character exploring Shadow Island. The player can also choose to play as anthropologist Aline Cedrac. Though borrowing liberally from the control scheme and settings of the early *Resident Evil* games, *The New Nightmare* introduces more dynamic lighting effects that are worked into the game's mechanics (the creatures in the game are sensitive to light) and features two different styles of gameplay, much like playing as either Edward or Grace offered in *Alone in the Dark 2*. This time, playing as Edward presents a more action-oriented game, and playing as Aline offers a more puzzled-oriented experience. Despite some promising features, reviews were mixed and sales relatively tepid in a genre dominated and likely biased by higher-profile series.

Like the other genre staples, *Resident Evil* and *Silent Hill*, *Alone in the Dark* received a movie adaptation in 2005, very loosely based on *The New Nightmare*. Unfortunately, as bad as movies based on videogames can be, the *Alone in the Dark* movie was even worse than most of these, directed incompetently by the infamous Uwe Boll, who seemingly found most of the survival horror aspects of the game unimportant for inclusion in the film. As film critic Mark Ramsey quipped, "*Alone in*

the Dark is certainly what you'll be if you're in the theater for *this* movie."³

Despite being saddled with the legacy of what is considered one of the worst movies of all time, Atari, which holding company Infogrames had a majority stake in before assuming the name, still released a new entry in the series. Under the now-overused title of *Alone in the Dark*, the game was released in 2008 for the Nintendo Wii, Microsoft Xbox 360, Sony PlayStation 2, and Sony PlayStation 3. Completing Edward Carnby's transformation from an unusual 1920s private detective to a rather generic leather-coat-wearing, five-o'clock-shadow-having Keanu Reeves lookalike, the game tasks the player with investigating rumors, allegations, and suspicions of clandestine activity in the tunnels below Central Park in New York City.

The 2008 version of *Alone in the Dark* adds a few intriguing elements to the classic formula, including driving cars, an option for first-person perspective (something present in light-gun-based *Resident Evil* games), and a highly publicized fire modeling element. The fire simulation boldly attempts to mimic the real thing, and can be used for taking out enemies and burning or melting objects in the environment. Unfortunately, some of the other newer elements—like fetch quests and extensive backtracking—don't work quite as well and drag down what could have been a tighter and more impactful gaming experience. Critical reception was mixed at best, with major criticisms being its glitchy gameplay and confusing controls. However, with sufficient sales, unlike *The New Nightmare*, the game should provide a strong foundation for additional sequels that might address some of the game's failings and help to deservedly restore the *Alone in the Dark* name to something more than a *Resident Evil* pretender in the eyes of many modern gamers.

³<http://www.moviejuice.com/2005/alone>.

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CASTLE WOLFENSTEIN (1981): ACHTUNG! STEALTH GAMING STEPS OUT OF THE SHADOWS

Silas Warner's *Castle Wolfenstein*, published by Muse in 1981 for the Apple II (later ported to Atari 8-bit, Commodore 64, and PC) laid the foundation and set the standard for all other games of stealth. Set during World War II, *Castle Wolfenstein* puts the player in the boots of an Allied prisoner. The prisoner's mission is not only to escape the heavily guarded dungeon in which he is imprisoned, but also to steal Nazi war plans hidden elsewhere in the castle. This exciting setting creates the perfect environment for the game's emphasis on stealth. Years before games like Konami's *Metal Gear* (1987, MSX2; and later in a modified form for other platforms), *Castle Wolfenstein* and its 1984 sequel, *Beyond Castle Wolfenstein* (Apple II, Atari 8-bit, Commodore 64, PC), demonstrated that cleverly avoiding enemies can be just as fun as blowing them to bits.

One of the first things new players notice about *Castle Wolfenstein* is the depth and variety of its control options. On the Apple II version, there are options for the keyboard, paddles, or two-button joystick. However, only the keyboard option provides access to all commands; the space bar is used for searching and unlocking, the "T" key is used to throw a grenade, the "U" key is used to utilize a chest's contents, and the "Return" key is used to list the character's inventory. Control is based on separate and very deliberate movement and aiming, though simultaneous movement and independent aiming can be difficult or even impossible depending on the configuration.¹ Atari 8-bit owners can play with the keyboard alone or in conjunction with one or two single-button joysticks;² the

¹See bonus chapter, "*Robotron: 2084* (1982): Running Away While Defending Humanoids," for games that offer smooth independent, simultaneous movement and aiming.

²When using two joysticks on the Atari 8-bit version, the first joystick's fire button throws grenades, and the second fires the gun.

Pictured on top of an Apple IIe with black paddles is the packaging for a later release of *Castle Wolfenstein* for the Apple II, with its iconic cover art and award note for *Electronic Games* magazine's 1983 Certificate of Merit for Outstanding Achievement. The inside back of the manual listing Muse's software catalog touts the game as "The #1 Best Selling Game in America!"



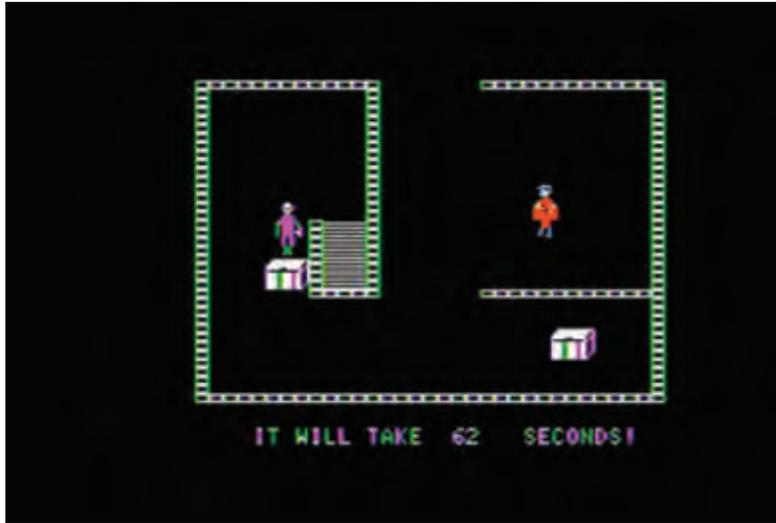
Commodore 64 and PC allow for a keyboard or a single joystick (one button on the former system, two on the latter). Needless to say, the variety of control options not only indicate the game's depth, but allow for different styles of play, including the participation of a second player.

Besides control options, the only other major differences between the versions are the visuals, and even those only vary cosmetically in color and detail. In each case, *Castle Wolfenstein* sports an unusual perspective. Each room is displayed from an overhead view, but the characters and objects are displayed from the side. Though the animation is jerky, the modified perspective and simple visuals set against a black background work well. It's easy to identify everything and know exactly where you are, an example that many modern 3D first- and third-person perspective games have failed to follow. In addition, regardless of what is happening, everything takes place on the current room screen, including informational text. The player is never taken away from the action.

Each room in the castle either has a doorway leading to another room or a stairway leading to another level. Other room elements are various combinations of interior doors, guards, and chests. Chests can be searched for useful items such as keys, and not-so-useful items, such as Eva Braun's diary,³ which have zero

³The companion of Adolf Hitler. With the war obviously lost, she committed suicide alongside the German Fuhrer roughly 24 hours after their marriage.

impact on gameplay. Food items are typically in the not-so-useful, zero-impact category, save for alcoholic beverages, which if chugged will temporarily impair player control until the drunken stupor wears off.



Searching a chest in *Castle Wolfenstein*.

Guards can be searched (like chests), either when held up at gunpoint or when dead. Unlike a chest, which can take some time to unlock and search, searching a guard produces nearly instant results. Items are automatically transferred to the player's inventory if they are needed or exceed present supply, but the maximum is 10 bullets, three grenades, keys, a bulletproof vest, a uniform, and the war plans for Operation Rheingold.

When the prisoner is spotted by a guard from a distance, the guard will shout German-language commands like “Achtung!” (“Attention!”) or “Halt!” (“Stop!”). If the prisoner stops, the guard will typically approach and touch (capture) him, effectively ending the game. If the prisoner flees, the guard will open fire. If the guard succeeds in killing the prisoner (which, realistically, occurs after only a few shots), the game also ends immediately.

The player can hold up a guard by surprising him with a drawn gun. Unfortunately, in one of a small handful of unfortunate design decisions, once held up and searched, guards cannot be disabled. The player must either quickly flee or just kill the guard anyway—assuming he has enough bullets. Indeed, bullet management is the key to the game. Ammunition tends to be sparsely available, and a clip can't be replenished, merely replaced with one containing more bullets. Players intending to “run and gun” their way through the game will have no chance; the only way to succeed is to methodically go from room to room, avoiding guards whenever possible. Players must carefully observe the

guards' patrol patterns and walk by them when their backs are turned. Of course, guards within earshot will hear bullets and shouts, also alerting them to the player's presence and location. Interestingly, sometimes the very act of where the player kills a guard must be carefully considered; even if other guards don't hear anything, when they come across a fallen comrade, they will know something is amiss and be on alert.



The end result of searching a held-up guard in *Castle Wolfenstein*.

Although guns are sometimes necessary to open locked doors (if there is no key or a guard doesn't open it first), chests can also be shot one or more times to speed up the time-consuming automatic unlock and search process. Unfortunately, chests sometimes contain explosives, which blow up if shot, immediately killing the player. In short, patience is less a virtue than a requirement.

SS stormtroopers can't be fooled as easily or intimidated like normal guards. They wear bulletproof vests, thus requiring a large number of bullets or a grenade to take them down. Grenades have a large zone of destruction and must be used with great care. Destructible environments are something that today's games are still struggling to fully implement, but *Castle Wolfenstein* offered a form of it over a quarter century ago. Though calling *Castle Wolfenstein's* environments destructible is an exaggeration, the grenade could be used to damage interior walls, adding another layer of strategy to the already nuanced gameplay. For instance, the player could blow up a wall and kill a guard behind it, or create a hole with which to shoot through. Although certainly no *Crusader: No Remorse* (Origin, 1995; PC, Sega Saturn, Sony

PlayStation) in terms of destructible, interactive environments,⁴ Warner's strategic design considerations never fail to impress.



Here, the player has procured a bulletproof vest and lobbed a grenade at the wall, which will remove two of the rectangular bricks to the lower right of the explosion. Grenades in *Castle Wolfenstein* can easily accidentally kill the player, but are highly effective when used correctly.

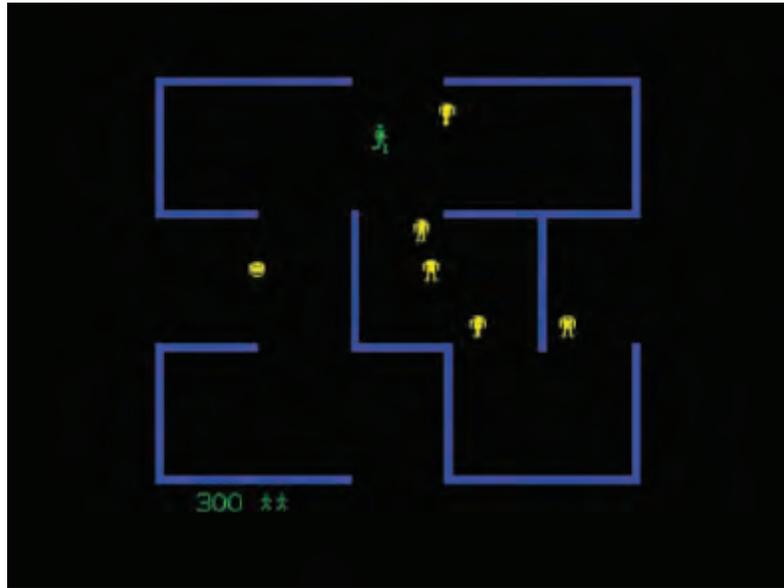
Audio is perhaps *Castle Wolfenstein's* most iconic element. Although there's no music and only sparse sound effects for walking and gunshots, where the game really shines is in its use of speech synthesis. Computers with poor sound capabilities like the Apple II and PC, which typically produced beeps and clicks on their tiny internal speakers, were nevertheless coaxed to generate recognizable speech in the form of eight German phrases and a scream. For fans of the game, hearing any of these clipped phrases brings an immediate nostalgia-tinged smile to their faces.

What can get lost in the haze of nostalgia beyond long load times is each room's inanimate objects, including the walls—or, more specifically, what happens when the player accidentally walks into one of them. The result is the player being momentarily subjected to a screeching, alarm-like sound effect, flashing screen, lack of control, and the character's return to an unarmed stance. Interestingly, as one of the game's most annoying features, there is no explanation for this in the game's manual. The only possible reasons from a design standpoint would be to force the player to play the game in a more methodical manner and make a quick escape from a dangerous situation even less certain. Of course, a comparison to Warner's unstated inspiration, *Berzerk*

⁴Though the *Crusader* series had other similarities to *Castle Wolfenstein* and its sequel, like the ability to loot intact dead bodies, working alarms, and enemies who made use of the environment, Origin's game was heavily biased toward frantic weapons-based combat and over-the-top deaths.

(Stern Electronics, 1980; Arcade, Atari 5200, Atari VCS 2600, GCE Vectrex), sheds further light on this and other features and design elements of *Castle Wolfenstein*.

Berzerk casts the player as a humanoid trying to escape individual rooms filled with robots before the indestructible Evil Otto appears. Armed with only a laser gun, the humanoid must avoid being killed by a robot's touch, shot, or explosion, as well as contact with the electrified walls. With its clever and early use of speech synthesis ("The humanoid must not escape"), modified perspective, single-screen encounters, enemies interacting with each other and the environment, and the requirement to sometimes escape a room without dispatching all enemies, *Berzerk* is the undeniable progenitor of *Castle Wolfenstein*.⁵ However, while many games like Datamost's *Thief* (1981; Apple II, Panasonic JR-200U) were essentially shameless *Berzerk* clones, right down to mimicking Evil Otto's timed appearance that kept arcade players from dawdling, *Castle Wolfenstein* did something special with the base concepts, turning a pure action game into something much more thoughtful and slower paced.



Screenshot from the arcade version of *Berzerk*. The indestructible Evil Otto (the round smiley face) has come out to attack because the player has lingered too long in the room.

Castle Wolfenstein's 1984 sequel, *Beyond Castle Wolfenstein*, released for the same platforms, kept most of the best play mechanics of the first game, while dramatically upping the

⁵Though *Berzerk*'s direct sequel, *Frenzy* (1982; Arcade, Coleco ColecoVision, Sinclair ZX Spectrum), featured slightly more sophisticated play elements and shootable walls, it's unlikely that *Castle Wolfenstein* had much, if any, influence on its development.

in-game possibilities. As the escape specialist from the first game, the underground resistance movement has arranged to sneak you from a courtyard into Adolf Hitler's underground Berlin bunker with a gun, 10 bullets, 100 German Marks (money) and at least one pass to show the guards. Upon entry into the bunker, it's up to the player to find a briefcase containing a bomb, locate Hitler's private conference room, and plant the bomb. Once the briefcase is in place and the timer set, the hero must make it back to the courtyard before the explosion.








You're practically a secret weapon since you escaped torture in Castle Wolfenstein.™ Nobody gets past Nazi guards better than you. That's why your commanders have a favor to ask: deliver a "package" to the Fuehrer. The Underground has smuggled a bomb into a closet inside the Fuehrer's Berlin Bunker. Now it's up to you to move it to a secret conference room, set the timer... and escape. And that won't be easy. The bunker is crawling with elite stormtroopers. Any one of them will trip the alarm at the least suspicion of trouble. But you're not worried. You're ready for whatever it takes to win this war. You're ready to go Beyond Castle Wolfenstein.™

The Features

Beyond Castle Wolfenstein™ is the **sequel** to one of America's all-time best-selling **action adventure** games; **suspense, drama** and **tension** mount as the game demands **quick manual response** and even **quicker decision-making**.

The ingenuity that created Castle Wolfenstein™ is alive and well—and now more ingenious than ever.



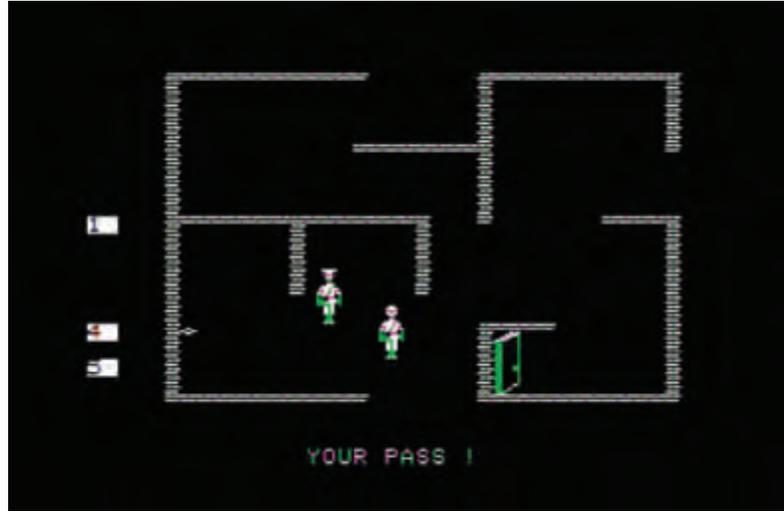
347 N. CHARLES STREET BALTIMORE, MD. 21201 (301) 659-7212

Box and manual back for *Beyond Castle Wolfenstein*.

Sneaking past the guards is a bit more complicated this time, and involves passes. When a guard demands a pass, the player will have to show the proper pass or be asked again. The player

can either try again with a different pass or attempt to bribe the guard with money. Besides the standard patrolling guards, there are guards seated at desks. These guards can also be bribed this time for information.

A guard asks the player for the correct pass in *Beyond Castle Wolfenstein*. Shown to the left, the player has passes 1, 4 and 5.



As usual, shooting guards must be done as covertly as possible, though now alarms add additional challenge. Not only will a guard pursue you if he thinks something suspicious is going on, he will also attempt to set off an alarm, which alerts the whole bunker to your presence. The alarm can only be disabled by finding and using a toolkit.

In a further nod to stealth over brute force, the grenades from the previous game have been replaced with a dagger, which can be used to silently kill guards. The player's character also has the ability to drag dead bodies to a less conspicuous location within a room. With additional emphasis on uniformed disguise, there are also new commands for holstering a weapon, helping to further mitigate the guard's suspicions.

There are no chests in the bunker—only closets. Instead of an automatic timed search, the player must crack a three-digit code, listening closely for when each of the lock's tumblers is triggered. If an incorrect number in any of the three slots is entered, the player must try again. Closets contain the usual assortment of items, as well as the occasional first aid kit, allowing the character to tend to injuries, which have a noticeable effect on his ability to maneuver.

In just about every way, *Beyond Castle Wolfenstein* is a sequel done right. Gameplay is more stealth-based, ambitious, and challenging; even accidentally walking into objects causes only a



In a very interesting design decision that actually works in making the gameplay notably different from the original, grenades have been replaced with a knife in *Beyond Castle Wolfenstein*, allowing for silent kills. Unfortunately for the player (gun drawn) in the screenshot, the alarm has already been set off from a failed gunfight in the prior room and he is severely wounded, making him an easy target for the oncoming guard.

slight pause this time around. It gives fans of the first game more of what they loved, but is a refreshingly distinct experience. It set an even higher bar for in-game interactivity.

Although there would be no other *Wolfenstein* games from either Warner or Muse, there were games from countless other sources that took some of the elements of the original two games much further. These include *Impossible Mission* (Epyx, 1984; Commodore 64, Nintendo DS, Sega Master System, and others), a side-perspective action adventure that casts the player as an athletic, acrobatic, and unarmed secret agent who needs to search through danger-filled rooms for puzzle pieces to ultimately bring down the diabolical Professor Elvin Atombender;⁶ *D/Generation* (Mindscape, 1991; Atari ST, Commodore Amiga CD32, and others), where, from an isometric perspective, the player is tasked with getting through puzzle-heavy booby-trapped rooms in a high rise building; and *Relentless: Twinsen's Adventure* (Activision, 1994; PC, Sony PlayStation),⁷ which is played from a 3D isometric perspective, with the player putting the main character into one of four different modes of behavior, including “Discreet,” which includes quietly tip-toeing and the ability to hide.

Of course the most famous of these latter-day *Wolfenstein*-inspired games is the aforementioned *Metal Gear*, marking the first appearance of “Solid Snake,” a now legendary videogame

⁶Like *Castle Wolfenstein* before it, *Impossible Mission* was famous for its speech synthesis, which included the game opening, “Another visitor. Stay awhile ... stay forever!”

⁷Released as *Little Big Adventure* through Electronic Arts in Europe, this underrated title was Frederick Raynal’s next game after *Alone in the Dark*, which is discussed in [Chapter 1](#), “*Alone in the Dark* (1992): The Polygons of Fear.”

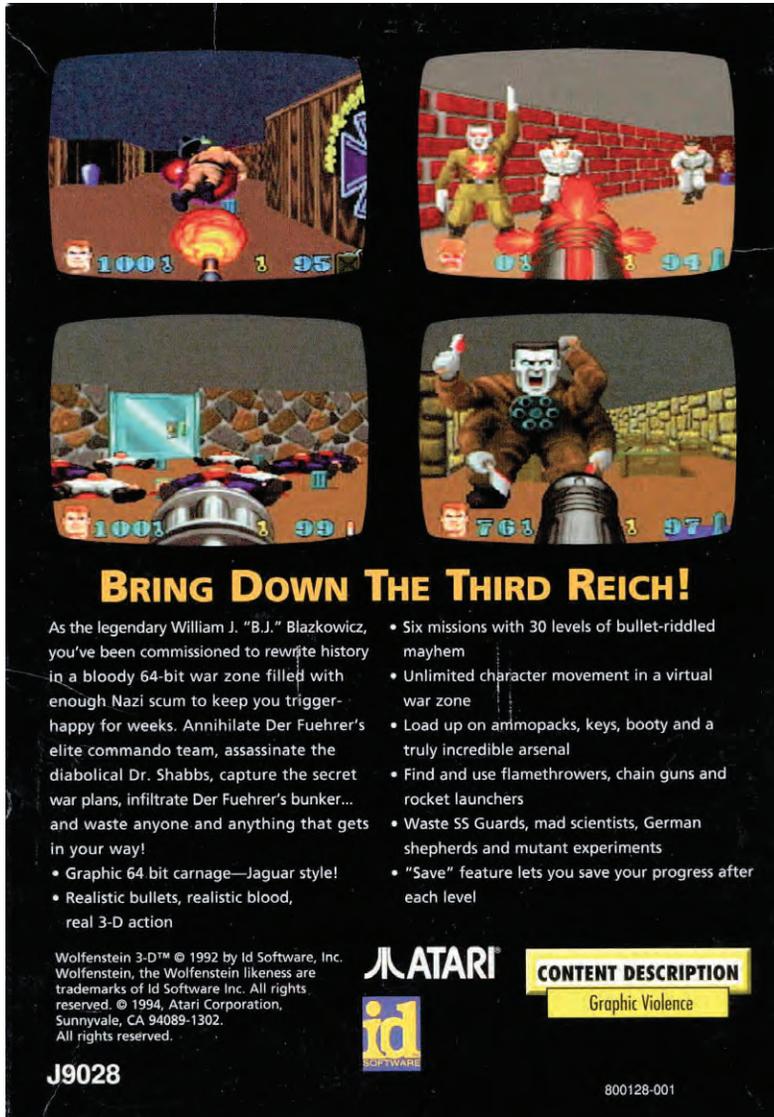
character used in countless games right up to 2008's *Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns of the Patriots* (Konami; Sony PlayStation 3). Each successive game in the series typically ramped up the original *Metal Gear*'s complexity and ambition levels and built further on the previous entry, right through its initial overhaul from a slanted overhead 2D perspective to state-of-the-art third-person 3D.

Metal Gear casts the player as special forces operative Solid Snake, who must infiltrate a fortified compound to ultimately destroy the titular machine, a bipedal walking tank capable of launching nuclear missiles from anywhere in the world. The player must carefully avoid visual contact and direct confrontation with patrolling guards. If Solid Snake is spotted, he must hide in a manner specific to the type of alert the guards are on. Initially unarmed, Solid Snake eventually becomes well equipped with a wide range of weaponry, which can also be used to clear obstacles. Punching guards can sometimes yield rations or ammunition, and, much like in *Beyond Castle Wolfenstein*, specific key cards are sometimes needed to gain access to additional areas.

In what amounted to nothing less than a lovingly crafted and well-executed tribute to *Castle Wolfenstein*, id Software released *Wolfenstein 3D* in 1992 (3DO, Apple Macintosh, PC, and others).⁸ Though it's discussed in [Chapter 6](#), "*Doom* (1993): The First Person Shooter Takes Control," for its influence on *Doom*, it's important to note here that *Wolfenstein 3D* took all of the iconic elements from *Castle Wolfenstein* and its sequel, like the castle setting, the guards, and the clever use of speech synthesis, and turned it all into a silky-smooth and approachable single-player first-person shooter. Though there is some possibility for sneaking up on guards, the majority of stealth and slower-paced elements were removed in lieu of quick action, which favored the game engine and interface. Starting with 2001's *Return to Castle Wolfenstein* (Apple Macintosh, Microsoft Xbox, PC, and others), *Wolfenstein 3D* has received a semiregular stream of sequels, though the large jump in technology and player expectations have made them only marginally recognizable to fans of the original.

Castle Wolfenstein's legacy can't be overestimated, particularly in regard to its integration of basic stealth elements into its gameplay. Today, of course, there are countless games with some type of stealth-based elements in them, ranging from games that make stealth an integral part of their gameplay, like the critically acclaimed series-spawning action adventures, *Thief: The Dark Project* (Looking Glass Studios, 1998; PC), *Hitman: Codename 47* (Eidos, 2000; PC), and *Beyond Good and Evil* (Ubisoft, 2003;

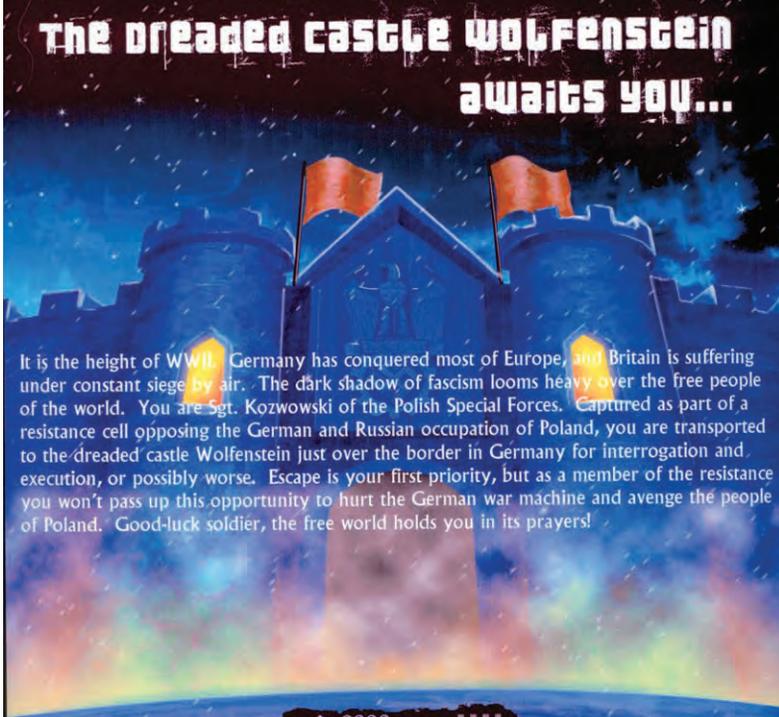
⁸*Wolfenstein 3D* is the reason some refer to the original *Castle Wolfenstein* as "Wolfenstein 2D" today.



Back of the box for the Atari Jaguar version of *Wolfenstein 3D*, a game that focused more on action and aspects of the Nazi regime's infamous human experiments than its progenitors.

Microsoft Xbox, Nintendo GameCube, PC, Sony PlayStation 2), to games that include them as a small part of their total game-play scope, like first-person shooter *The Operative: No One Lives Forever* (Fox Interactive, 2000; PC, Sony PlayStation 2), action adventure *The Legend of Zelda: The Wind Waker* (Nintendo, 2002; Nintendo GameCube), and the licensed *Kung Fu Panda* (2008, Activision; PC, Sony PlayStation 3, and others). It is a testament to Warner's genius that his brilliant gameplay designs, introduced so early in videogame history, are still inspiring developers and thrilling gamers to this day.

The dreaded castle Wolfenstein awaits you...



It is the height of WWII. Germany has conquered most of Europe, and Britain is suffering under constant siege by air. The dark shadow of fascism looms heavy over the free people of the world. You are Sgt. Kozowski of the Polish Special Forces. Captured as part of a resistance cell opposing the German and Russian occupation of Poland, you are transported to the 'dreaded' castle Wolfenstein just over the border in Germany for interrogation and execution, or possibly worse. Escape is your first priority, but as a member of the resistance you won't pass up this opportunity to hurt the German war machine and avenge the people of Poland. Good-luck soldier, the free world holds you in its prayers!



Eight different levels crawling with Nazis and their mad scientist progeny!



Will you be able to escape? Not if the SS guards have anything to do with it!



Kill or avoid the enemies and grab the item in each room to craft your escape!

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Beyond id's own contributions to the *Wolfenstein* legacy, fans of the series have also kept the torch burning, such as with 2004's homebrew cartridge *Wolfenstein VCS* for the Atari 2600 Video Computer System, box back shown, and its enhanced sequel, *Wolfenstein VCS: The Next Mission* (2006). Both of the homebrew games are based on code from the Atari 2600 version of Exidy's 1981 arcade game, *Venture* (Coleco, 1982), a fantasy-themed action adventure that shares similarities with both *Berzerk* and *Castle Wolfenstein*.

DANCE DANCE REVOLUTION **(1998): THE PLAYER BECOMES THE STAR**

At first glance, *Dance Dance Revolution* (Konami, 1998;¹ Arcade; other platforms and games in the series later), or *DDR*,² is a glorified game of “Simon Says.”³ After all, to play *DDR*, the gamer simply steps on one of four arrows positioned up, down, left, and right on a platform, trying to match a corresponding scrolling arrow when it reaches a specific point at the top of the screen (when the game “says”). If the player successfully steps on the right arrow at the right time, the player’s score and status increases; if not, the player’s status decreases (the game didn’t “say”). This is of course set to any one of a number of original and licensed dance songs with a wacky disembodied DJ voice shouting encouragement like, “Yeah! Do it!” and “You’re a dance animal!” and some not-so-positive comments like, “Did you have breakfast today?” and “Are your legs okay?,” relative to your performance.

To understand what makes *DDR* truly a revolution, we need to first reflect on the gamer stereotype. It seems almost any time a “gamer” is represented in a film or television show, we see a pale, overweight teenager with awkward movements and stilted speech.

¹From Konami’s Bemani music videogame division, which (besides the title game) has produced many other popular performance games, including those that use faux DJ mixing boards and musical instruments. Many games in the Bemani series have been released only in Japan.

²Some territories and later entries in the series used the name *Dancing Stage* instead of *Dance Dance Revolution*, making the abbreviation *DS*.

³Or Milton Bradley’s Ralph Baer–designed electronic handheld *Simon* game (1978), with its four large iconic colored buttons arranged in a circular formation. *Simon* would play a tone as each one of the colored buttons were lit. The player was required to repeat the colored lighting/sound sequence by pressing the corresponding buttons. *Simon* succeeded where the game that inspired it, Atari’s arcade *Touch Me* (1974), failed, by focusing on color and pleasing sounds—in other words, providing a good interactive experience to go along with the core gameplay. This was a lesson obviously not lost on the designers of *DDR*.

A sequence of two screenshots from the Sony PlayStation version of *Dance Dance Revolution*, describing the simple gameplay.



Further, the mass media seems obsessed with vilifying the games industry for society's woes, blaming them for—among other things—the alleged crisis in adolescent and teenage obesity. Even avid gamers often deride their own favorite hobby, lamenting that they wasted so much time playing games when they should have been playing sports or enjoying the outdoors. As Dani Bunten Berry, developer of *M.U.L.E.* and *Cytron Masters* once put it, “No one ever said on their deathbed, ‘Gee, I wish I had spent more time alone with my computer.’”⁴ Part of the problem may be that, unlike most sports, watching someone play a videogame is seldom a rewarding activity for spectators, today's professional gaming leagues notwithstanding.⁵ In short, even if all sorts of wonderful things are happening onscreen, the gamer seems to be doing little more than clicking buttons from a comfy seat. Few games offer opportunities for impressive physical performances.

The brilliance of *DDR* lies precisely in providing such opportunities. A dedicated fan of *DDR* will often develop the physical prowess necessary not only to achieve high scores in the game, but to impress spectators passing by the machine. Because players are penalized only for not hitting correct dance steps and can add in their own, many *DDR* aficionados create intricate flourishes and routines that are intended more for fun and the audience's delight than for winning the game.⁶ In an interview with the authors, Ryan Cravens, Marketing Manager for arcade game and amusements

⁴See <http://www.anticlockwise.com/dani/personal/biz/index.html> for this and other Bunten quotations, and Chapter 6, “*Dune II: The Building of a Dynasty* (1992): Strategy in Real Time,” for more on *Cytron Masters*.

⁵It can be argued that outside of certain countries like South Korea, professional gaming leagues are geared more to masses of competitors rather than masses of spectators.

⁶Episode 103 from Season 5 of the TV show *Malcolm in the Middle*, entitled “Dewey's Special Class,” features the characters of Hal and Craig playing a fictional *DDR* clone called *Jump Jump Dance Party*. The half-hour comedy effectively spoofed the often over-the-top theatrics and choreographed antics that can result when the best players take to a *DDR* platform, even earning the show an Emmy Award nomination for outstanding choreography. A similar scenario would play out in a memorable scene from the otherwise forgettable comedy movie about a videogame tester, *Grandma's Boy* (2006).