Videogames and Public Play in the Late 1970s: the Case of TV POWWW!

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ABSTRACT

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BODY TEXT

Imagine on a certain day in March 1979 you tuned in to *A.M. Los Angeles*, Southern California's top-rated morning television program. On this day you would see the show's hosts, Sarah Purcell and Regis Philbin, excitedly discuss a game they will shortly premiere. Purcell picks up a joystick for the Fairchild Channel F, the first home videogame system to use cartridges. Using a split-screen with hosts above and videogame below, Purcell manipulates the game controller to shoot at a target while Philbin clarifies that a viewer at home calling into the show will not press a button to shoot, but will "say 'pow,' and when you say 'pow' you will activate that bullet." After the demonstration Philbin greets a caller: "Good morning Orange County—you're on TV POWWW!" The caller repeatedly shouts "pow" as bullets fly across the screen. Purcell exclaims "it works, it works! I don't believe it!"

Had you been watching that day, you would have witnessed the first broadcast of TV POWWW!, a little-known technology from early videogame history that allowed television viewers to control videogames over the telephone. In this paper we offer a detailed account of the rise and fall of TV POWWW! and its technical functions. We also explore TV POWWW!'s implications for the history of videogames, online interactivity, media spectatorship, and game design. While our analysis focuses on the

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United States, TV POWWW! spread to other countries including Australia, Brazil, and Italy. For a time, it was one way that people learned about the cultural phenomenon of arcade and home videogames, which were experiencing considerable growth in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

TV POWWW! has hardly been studied. It has been mentioned in passing as a precursor of streaming videogame play (Taylor 2018), or as an early form of televised esports (Kerttula 2019; Zhouxiang 2022, 2023). While we discuss TV POWWW! as part of these histories, we also explore three ways in which its significance extends far beyond streaming and esports.

First, TV POWWW! reveals how the emergence of videogames was a complex, interconnected historical process. TV POWWW! was developed by Marvin A. (Marv) Kempner, a broadcasting executive who had been involved in television syndication since the late 1940s. Interactive forms of radio like "Dialing for Dollars" date to the late 1930s, and by the 1950s had spread to television. Kempner had been a pioneer in these interactive experiments, and drew together expertise in syndication, interactive technology, and marketing to develop TV POWWW! (Kempner 1998). From its beginnings, TV POWWW! was deeply linked to the emergence of the "second generation" of videogame consoles that used cartridges. It was initially developed for the Fairchild Channel F, the first second-generation system to reach the US market (Whalen 2012). When Fairchild discontinued the Channel F, Kempner switched to Intellivision, the Mattel Electronics console that was the primary rival to the Atari VCS. The technology involved a "POWWW BOX" sold to television stations, which included a subscription to custom-made TV POWWW! games. The television station would then connect a Channel F or Intellivision console to a television and the POWWW BOX. Viewers would call into the station on their telephones, and speak the word "POW," which the POWWW BOX would translate into firing an action button. TV POWWW! thus emerged through the assemblage of videogame console, television, telephone, and POWWW BOX.

A second significance of TV POWWW! concerns the history of interactive television. TV POWWW! involved a studio host greeting the telephone caller, encouraging them as they played and showing the prizes they could win. This dyadic interaction with a studio host was critical. Surviving recordings show rich banter between host and caller, in contrast to very basic interaction with the video game (timing one's utterances, or simply yelling "pow!" "pow!" "pow!" as fast as possible). When promoting TV POWWW! Kempner and his staff consistently and explicitly framed TV POWWW! as "interactive" or "2-way" television, with promo images showing a caller at home speaking to a television host. TV POWWW! undomesticated home videogames, moving them not back to the arcade but into a televisual sphere of public spectatorship, revealing early connections between television and games (Murphy 2011; Newman 2017).

Third, TV POWWW! transformed videogame design. Play with arcade games, handhelds, and first-generation systems like *Pong* was brief, due to technical limitations and (in the case of arcades) a revenue model predicated on quarters going into slots as often as possible. Second-generation systems, located in the home, allowed far more complex games. This was particularly true for Intellivision. One marker of the system's "intelligence" compared to its rival Atari were sports and strategy titles, making full use of Intellivision's 12-button hand controller and often taking an hour or more per play. TV POWWW! required radical game redesign. The

POWWW BOX registered only the verbal equivalent of pressing a single button (Plotnick 2018). Moreover, Kempner's syndication model involved TV POWWW! appearing as short segments between regular children's programming, with each game play time limited to 30 seconds. Through extensive archival analysis and interviews with game designers who created TV POWWW! titles, we explore how this early form of "demaking" illuminates tensions during this early period regarding the forms and goals of gameplay, as well as the political economy of game design when such work was not yet a clear specialization and independent game studios were just beginning to appear.

Taken together, these lines of analysis show the crucial insights TV POWWW! as a "minor platform" provides into the history of technology (Nicoll 2019). TV POWWW! made videogames accessible to a mainstream audience. It was also a crucial technology that acclimated users and viewers to a future of "online" interactivity, where people would not only talk at distance (telephone) or see at a distance (television) but act at a distance (telepresence). TV POWWW! thus speaks to linkages in the late 1970s and early 1980s between videogames and the rise of home computers and forms of interactive communication (Mailland and Driscoll 2017).

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