



GAME ON

SUPERCADÉ / EDITOR: VAN BURNHAM / MIT PRESS / 448 PAGES / \$49.95

ELECTRONIC PLASTIC / EDITOR: JARO GIELENS / DIE GESTALTEN VERLAG / 176 PAGES / \$44.00

by francis hwang

Van Burnham's *Supercade*, a history of the first era of videogames, starts with a trickle and builds to a tidal wave. In the beginning, coverage of the early years is slim, represented only by tentative developments at cloistered geek compounds like MIT and the Brookhaven National Laboratory. But as the book documents how the medium develops commercial potential in the mid-1970s, the pages swell, expounding on *Pong*, *Breakout*, the Atari 2600, *Space Invaders*, *Asteroids*... more games, more quarters, more kids clutching joysticks.

A loving tribute to videogames manufactured between 1971 and 1984, *Supercade* is both thoroughly researched and impressively produced. It draws extensively from interviews with and writings by people who played a part in the industry's first decade, from an MIT programmer who helped create the pioneering "Spacewar!" to a player who appeared on the game show "Starcade!" as a child. This reportage is presented in a dizzying, full-color layout, replete with full-page screenshots and samples of cabinet art that adorned the sides of the first arcade machines.

Readers looking for a critical history, however, are bound to be disappointed. Most of the book's text is organized into one-page snippets that do nothing to establish a sense of continuity; it's hard to discern trends, tendencies, and schools of thought amid the pixels and paragraphs. And Van

Burnham squanders the chance to ask a number of difficult questions about the industry's past and present—questions that are always most incisive when they come from someone who loves the subject as she clearly does: Why are videogames so fascinating in theory but so derivative in practice? Were there ever designers who wanted the medium to be more ambitious, and how were their ideas received? And what about efforts to turn the industry into less of a boys' club? Van Burnham clearly knows what she loves about videogames, but never cares to address anything she hates. As a result, her otherwise charming book sometimes feels more like a series of press releases than a history.

In contrast to the ascendant tone of *Supercade*, German designer Jaro Gielens' *Electronic Plastic* is suffused with the melancholy of nostalgia. While *Supercade* describes the meager beginnings of a potent new medium, *Electronic Plastic* catalogs a branch of that medium's history—handheld electronic games in the pre-Game Boy era—a field that seemed fated to obsolescence as soon as it began.

Starting with Mattel's release of "Auto Race" in 1976, *Electronic Plastic* draws from Gielens' private collection to document the flurry of handheld diversions that were released over the following decade. It's a visual history full of ingenious oddities—flightstick-shaped joysticks, mini-steering wheels, stereoscopic screens. The timeline

is light on continuity; Gielens makes little attempt to establish any sense of lineage or progress, either in his short descriptions or in the book's organizational scheme. This sort of incoherence makes *Supercade* a flawed work, but it suits *Electronic Plastic* perfectly.

The difference is one of subject matter. The designs featured in *Electronic Plastic* were subject to severe constraints such as portability, marketability, and cheap production value; these pressures may have been too demanding to allow gradual maturation. Innovations were as disposable as the devices they debuted on, simply to be discarded after the next birthday party. The only constant in *Electronic Plastic* is the endless churn of the new.

It was for these reasons that the novelties of the genre didn't outlive the rise of home consoles in the 1980s. With the exception of the cross-shaped button joystick—which lives on in various Nintendo products—most of the innovations that appear in Gielens' book are only archaeological curiosities. Today our attentions are focused on a different sort of handheld toy, each promising to seamlessly combine the functionality of a PDA, MP3 player, cell phone, Blackberry, and Web browser. In light of a retrospective like *Electronic Plastic*, it's tempting to look at the new portables race and ask: Will these forms fade as unceremoniously? There is such a thing as design that history has no use for.



Supercade recalls a kinder, gentler arcade game, like Pole Position (above), while Electronic Plastic worships old-school collectible handhelds (below and left). Who's up for a round of mini-Donkey Kong (right)?

