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Keeping Up With Atari: Neoliberal Expectations in Early Electronics Advertising

Abstract

During the early 1980s, ad campaigns framed purchasing and using emerging consumer electronics as tools for accessing, what Lauren Berlant called, ‘the good life.’ Computers, video games, VCRs, and cassette players might help consumers cultivate a neoliberal, upwardly mobile, and implicitly white, lifestyle. This paper explores early personal computer and home console video game advertisements as a cultural discourse that framed emerging technology through normative gendered, raced, and classed everyday lifestyles in an American context. The central case study is the early 1980s televisual ad campaign for the Atari 2600 system, featuring the “Have You Played Atari Today?” jingle. The campaign was widely viewed and is representative of contemporaneous marketing approaches. The ad’s allusion to time management both reinforced broader neoliberal paradigms and enacted a gendered slippage between labour and leisure. This paper draws from feminist critical theory approaches and uses textual analysis to understand the ways that electronic advertisements appealed to late capitalist social attitudes.

Keywords

technology; electronic; Atari; gender; everyday; neoliberal

A white middle-aged man turns away from his computer to make eye contact with the camera—he offers a little salute. A young white family slides down a waterslide and goes for a jog. Another middle-aged white man uses his computer poolside. Young white women—one a sales clerk, one a teacher—both look up from their computers, again offering the camera a small salute. In the early 1980s, the American and Australian television advertisements for Commodore 64 personal computers scored these images by repeating the jingle, ‘Are you keeping up with the Commodore? Cause the Commodore is keeping up with you!’¹

Across popular advertisements and magazines of the 1980s, such as the Commodore ad, consumers were invited to consider the exponential technological changes that were both already

underway and set to increase. But in a far cry from Apple's infamous dystopian '1984 Won't be like 1984' Super Bowl ad, many of these discourses instead imagined consistent technological change within everyday life. Media that represented emerging technology in everyday life often revealed the social instability of neoliberalism and late capitalism in the 1980s—particularly in the tension between change and maintaining the status quo and the elusive promise of aspirational lifestyles. My attention to the ordinary use of technology—rather than dystopian or sensational—also reveals how normative perspectives on gender and race (particularly whiteness) were frequently extended in popular discourses about emerging electronics.

Like the aspirational tone of the 'keeping up' language that Commodore employs, magazines, advertisements, film, and television framed engagement with ongoing technological change as a desirable habit for workers and consumers alike. Indeed, numerous articles in women's magazines, such as "Money-Making Careers for the 1980s" in *Ebony* and "Hot Jobs for the 90s" in *Woman's Day*, encouraged women to acquire computer skills for jobs that were still emerging.² Readers were simultaneously invited to consider the computer as a multi-faceted tool that could assist busy women in their existing tasks, including transmitting letters, teaching children the alphabet, handling personal finance, or making purchases.

Rounding out the 'lifestyle' emphasis on electronic technology, in 1983 Atari ran advertisements in magazines including *Parents* and *Woman's Day* to market their collaboration with *Sesame Street: the Children's Computer Workshop*. The ad's copy reminds parents, and anyone else considering purchasing the Atari 2600 VCS program for a child in their life, that whether or not adults are ready for the computer age, 'children will have to be (...) they [computer workshop programs] encourage children to practise important early-learning skills.'³ The ad continues that the program will, 'provide them [children] with the opportunity and the advantage of being exposed to something [computers] which will soon be as important to a well-rounded person as music, or literature, or even baseball.' Atari aligned the imperative for early childhood education with the burgeoning need to gain computer skills as early as possible. However, these ads all suggest that for the average American the 'computer age' was a horizon—both a technological milieu that was still developing as well as an unfixed destination.

Across the Commodore and Atari ads, as well as women's magazines, consumer electronics were framed as both ordinary and yet inherently in flux, unstable, or 'in crisis.' Across cultural and new media studies respectively, Lauren Berlant and Wendy Chun have both described how everyday life in

the late 20th and early 21st century is often characterised by ‘crisis.’⁴ Surrounded by the disorganisation and precarity of expanding global capitalism, the individual is beset by constant change—updating constantly, so to speak, simply to maintain some sense of the status quo. That this instability was often characterised by the consistent aspirational tone of preparing children or one’s own career to ‘keep up’ in the computer age evokes what Berlant calls ‘the good life.’ The ‘good life’ refers to the fantasy for economic, social, and intimate stability that was both promised and continues to remain elusive, in capitalist societies since the mid 20th century.⁵ The circular language of the Commodore 64 ad hints at the inherent instability of the convergence of technology and aspirations for the good life—you’re keeping up with the computer and the computer is keeping up with you. By definition, the constant state of technological momentum means the potential user would never arrive at a point of stability with the computer.

This paper responds to a broader scholarly shift to understand the ways that computers and electronic technology feel ordinary and are shaped through social and cultural forces. For example, Kris Cohen and Scott Richmond propose the idea of ‘computational personhood’ as, ‘the ways in which computation—not only our computational technologies but also the economic, ordinary, practical, and aesthetic impacts of computing—elaborates forms of life, modes of experience, and structures of subjectivity.’⁶ By way of adding to this conversation, this essay offers an extended analysis of the ‘Have You Played Atari Today’ ad campaign from the early 1980s. Studying emerging media through their marketing campaigns offers insight into the appeals made to potential consumers. Advertisements both index who the buyers might be, but also how the technology companies wanted to condition their use of technology. As media studies scholars including Lynn Spigel and Jesper Verhoef have suggested about television and portable radio respectively, advertising can index how technologies were imagined to fit into pre-existing social and cultural constructs.⁷

The advertisements analysed in this article often imagined late capitalist and neoliberal aspirations for the ‘good life’ while simultaneously extending normative ideas of the status quo or ‘the same.’ During the 1980s and early 1990s, popular culture repeatedly invited women to imagine how computers and other emerging electronics—including video, video games, and ‘cordless phones’—might soon become part of their everyday social, domestic, and professional routines. In other words, the imagined reader was invited to expect that whatever their existing habits and routines might be, emerging electronic technology would increasingly be a part of them.⁸

Feminist scholars have repeatedly observed how emerging technologies often condition habits that enact a slippage between labour and leisure. In *Playing with Feelings*, Aubrey Anable gestures to the mid-century scheduling and reception of television soap operas as inherently correlated with the expectations of women's domestic labour.⁹ She compares this to how current 'casual games' offer a similar digital alternative—they are easy to learn, interruptible, and available in short intervals between moments of labour and leisure.¹⁰ Scholars such as Melissa Gregg and Chun further extend this analysis of habit and digital technology.¹¹ Habits typically go unnoticed when they are thoroughly inculcated. But as Chun tells us about digital media, going unnoticed is precisely why and where habits matter most.¹² Repetitive connections between people and their technology are conditioned, however natural they may seem. Close attention to popular discourse on consumer electronics in the 1980s—including magazines and advertisements—shows how cultivating routines was similarly a popular mode for imagining emerging technology during this transitional technological era. As my case study of an Atari ad campaign will show, the temporal expectations placed on women were, and continue to be, bound up with technology.

Atari's shift into the home has often been understood as a continued mobilisation of arcade culture that particularly appealed to young men. However, analysing these ads through an interrogation of routines and everyday life reveals how the change of scenery was implicitly contingent on the disproportionate organisation of domestic labour and leisure time along lines of whiteness and feminine labour.¹³ My analysis offers a cultural history dimension to a growing body of feminist scholarship, including by Shira Chess and Alison Harvey, that analyses the contemporary relationship between video games, gender, domestic space, neoliberal ideology, and leisure.¹⁴ To draw out these textures in the ads of the 1980s, I read them alongside both contemporaneous sociological surveys of women's labour and in comparison with the increasingly popular 'self-help' genre of literature. While children and teens were imagined as frequent players, reading the Atari ads alongside sociological surveys from the 1980s further reveals the company's assumptions about the gendered dynamics of how parents and caregivers ought to be facilitating this family leisure time amid the increasing pressures of late capitalism on the disparity between labour and leisure time. This approach also illuminates how video game marketing appealed to women by showing video games within, and as an extension of, their expected domestic routines, suggesting that the technology might challenge that status quo.

Across multiple ads in the series, Atari re-tooled attitudes and terminology from the growing popularity of self- and time-management literature during the late 20th century. This approach positioned playing the Atari 2600 and its games as a desirable habit for integrating technology into everyday life. Neoliberal biases repeatedly animated popular discussions of how and why emerging technology should fit into potential consumers' everyday routines. However, self-help texts like *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* often completely overlooked the significant role of social identity in shaping habits and routines in everyday life.¹⁵ Repositioning self-help literature alongside popular discourse—including advertisements—reveals how invitations to these neoliberal modes of (technological) behaviour were often intertwined with the gendered expectations of domestic roles and the normative assumptions of whiteness.¹⁶

As Americans worked longer hours than ever, the 'Have You Played Atari Today?' ad campaign offers historically specific insight into the gendered and raced pressures of leisure and quality time as routines.¹⁷ This essay's extended case study of the early 1980s Atari ad campaign, 'Atari Today?' shows how framing emerging electronics as ordinary and mundane was contingent on a discourse of habit and routine that both extended and set the stage for subsequent popular perceptions of the highly gendered routines and temporal organisation of both labour and leisure for American women.

Have You Played Atari Today?

Whether or not consumers of the 1980s were already making a technological change in their personal routines, popular culture repeatedly emphasised that it behoved them to do so. By 1983, numerous women's magazines were running multi page articles on the 'electronically enhanced lifestyle.' Appeals were largely for the ways that purchasing 'video games, video cassette recorders, video discs, home computers, and even sharper and brighter television sets' would improve the life(style) of the reader.¹⁸ In other words, purchasing consumer electronics was framed in terms of how these items would fit into an already busy—yet also routine—lifestyle. In the early 1980s, as video games largely shifted from arcades to television and computer consoles, Atari followed suit by releasing a print and audiovisual ad campaign for the Atari 2600 system, featuring the catchy 'Have You Played Atari Today?' jingle.¹⁹

The series of ads introduced the audience to everyday contexts for video gaming, including a couple having a date night, friends hanging out in a dorm room, and various family gatherings. Atari introduced the major theme (and major spending) for their 1982 advertising campaign in a Product Release that named the campaign, ‘Have You Played a Game From Atari Today?’²⁰ Although it was the only iteration of this phrasing, the release heralds at least eight television commercials that used the explicit jingle, and at least five more that used the tune of the jingle although not the words.²¹ Here, I analyse five at length in addition to several others more briefly.

The leading question, ‘Have You Played Atari Today?’ makes it clear that Atari wanted the audience to see their video gaming system as a feasible part of a daily routine—whatever that routine may include. The campaign offers a widely seen example of the ways that emerging technology was framed within the perceived routines of a potential consumer audience during the electronic era. More broadly, the campaign alludes to the tensions between the ordinary habits and routines of domestic labour, leisure time, and gender as they might intertwine with new media technology.

The jingle’s question, ‘Have you played Atari today?’ suggests a rapidly shifting relationship between video gaming technology and habit. Although the word *today* implies that a potential consumer could and should use Atari as part of their daily routine, the question itself foregrounds the fact that this was not yet the case. Habits are often more difficult to perceive the more habituated they are.²² If everyone were indeed already playing Atari on a daily basis, it would be redundant to ask. But proto-media scholars including Walter Benjamin, as well as current scholars including Paul Roquet and James J. Hodge, remind us that habits with media are often not simply a question of subconscious automatic responses or even regular routines.²³ In short, the user adapts, or is adapting, to complex media environments that involve multiple changing media formats. Following Benjamin, Ben Highmore calls this condition ‘absentminded disposition’ or ‘distracted perception.’²⁴ Even when media recede to the periphery of attention, that recession has been conditioned through a complex set of cultural and technological conditions that are personally experienced, collectively circulating, and ephemeral. In this case, Atari’s multiple versions of the ‘Have You Played Atari Today’ ad campaign evoked burgeoning neoliberal self-management paradigms and the growing pressures on women’s labour and leisure time as the ads also worked to condition consumer responses to emerging electronics.

These advertisements offer a technological dimension to the rise of self-help and self-management literature that gained popularity especially from the 1970s onward. This genre of

writing asserts how forward change (such as upward mobility) is achieved through repetitive engagement—or habit. Books like Stephen Covey's *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* clearly aligned effective routines with a broader neoliberal identity that correlated 'internal growth to external success.'²⁵ Regardless of whether these self-help and time-management books focused on social or professional success, or both, they repeatedly emphasised a methodical daily practice. The 1985 *New York Times* Bestseller, *Women Who Love Too Much*, urges its reader to employ repetitive, and even daily, practice in minimising her overwhelming care for men who do not return her affection.²⁶ The 1986 *NYT* Bestseller, *Unlimited Power*, sits between 'new age' and business advice but similarly emphasises daily practice for everything from diet to career success.²⁷ Across this literature, the repeated emphasis on individual behaviour suggests the influence of growing neoliberal paradigms for understanding personal and professional habits. Similarly, these Atari ads depict multiple contexts for play and various levels of engagement. But regardless of who was playing, or what game they were playing, Atari extended the logic of self-help literature by centring active, routine engagement.

The self-appointed guru/authors of time management and self-help literary genres would often offer readers a mantra to help them in conditioning their daily routine—in many ways putting a neoliberal spin on the long running tradition of religious refrains. As Sara Ahmed suggests in *The Promise of Happiness*, this frequently took the form of using economic language to frame positive psychology. Much like Berlant's 'good life,' the elusive 'promise of happiness' can motivate labour and consumption habits in a bid to be, or do, what we desire.²⁸ Phrases such as 'eat the frog' or 'sharpen the saw' served as mental reminders for individualised productivity.²⁹ For example, Louise Hay's 1984 'new age' bestseller *You Can Heal Your Life* suggests that repetitive affirmations about one's personal power—whether for your love life, health, or career success—are not just important but actually the only way to reach desired outcomes.³⁰ Importantly, Hays, like many of the authors of this genre, makes little distinction between behavioural approaches to work and leisure—indicating a growing slippage between the two. 'Have You Played Atari Today' was a peppy and memorable reminder of a technological routine or 'ritual' that relied on purchasing an Atari 2600 and its game cartridges. As the next section will show, this ad campaign exemplified both the increasing slippage between work and leisure and the aspirational possibilities held out to consumers.

As affect and technology theorist Gregg notes, personal management books both extended earlier Fordist impulses *and* served as a precursor to current time management and productivity apps.³¹

Similar to the self-help genre in general, Atari's rhetoric reappropriated a model of daily efficiency honed in relation to both increasing self-management as well as the increasing slippage between professional and domestic labour since the 19th century.³² Atari's marketing approach also foreshadowed the explosion of digital games, such as Candy Crush Saga and Duolingo, that similarly employ reminders and bonuses to incentivize daily use. The Atari games themselves are not about time management. However, reading the ad's rhetoric alongside literature that evokes the 'management of leisure' also suggests how they might presage the current popularity of time management games.³³ By mobilising the extant language of routine alongside images of familiar, and even mundane, contexts for use, Atari also invited prospective buyers to imagine a horizon where habitual use permitted the still emerging video game technology to feel ordinary.

Bringing the Computer Age Home

To emphasise how seamlessly its products could be integrated into everyday life, 'Have You Played Atari Today?' frequently centred domestic settings. One such ad in the Atari series opens on a white grandson asking his grandmother if she wants to play *Berzerk*.³⁴ She affectionately slaps his knee and says, 'You're on!' Grandma has hustled off the front porch before the grandson has time to ask her where she's going. She calls over her shoulder, 'To the video arcade—you can't play *Berzerk* at home!' Grandson holds up the cartridge box while smiling, 'Now you can!' Grandma affectionately exclaims, 'Atari!' The scene cuts to Grandma and grandson playing *Berzerk* in the living room, laughing and shouting as the ad intercuts with video footage of the game. The ad closes with a white hand inserting a cartridge into the Atari 2600 home console system against a black background. Throughout the ad, a song about *Berzerk* from Atari plays in the background. As the colourful Atari logo appears, the jingle 'Have you played Atari today?' is sung at full volume.

The transition from Atari's previous ad campaign, 'We've brought the computer age home,' to 'Have you played Atari today?' (perhaps unintentionally) illustrates the slippage that feminist cultural scholars often identify between habit, routine, and domesticity—particularly for women.³⁵ Grandma's initial statement that you can't play Atari at home, as well as the various other ads in the series taking place in domestic settings, implies that playing Atari *today* was contingent on it being

playable *at home*. The shift between campaigns suggests that step one was getting Atari into the house; step two is using it on a daily basis. Beyond feminist cultural scholars, some contemporaneous computer scientists similarly perceived an approaching horizon of everyday mundane technological use. In his often cited 1991 article, Mark Weiser described his work as a computer scientist and executive at Xerox PARC as, ‘We are therefore trying to conceive a new way of thinking about computers, one that takes into account the human world and allows the computers themselves to vanish into the background.’³⁶ In this case, the routines of home and family are the background into which technology was meant to be disappearing. Through repeated use in a familiar environment, Atari was making the case that their technology was—or could be—ordinary.

While bringing the computer age home emphasised Atari’s multi functionality for learning, professionalisation, and recreation, *playing* Atari daily emphasised its potential as a technology for leisure. This was especially enticing in the 1980s as most Americans experienced an increasing disparity between the amount of time they had for leisure and the amount of time they had to dedicate to paid work.³⁷ The benefits of video gaming for things like computer learning and spatial awareness were not lost, but the ad’s language de-emphasised them in favour of a continued focus on heteronormative middle class sociality. In this case, playing Atari daily equated to gathering around the supplemented electronic hearth.³⁸ Home and domestic labour offer familiarity and amplify the comfort, routine, and monotony of everyday life.³⁹ In American culture, maintaining routines of household maintenance, child care, and family time management is often seen as the purview of women.⁴⁰ In this way, ensuring leisure or ‘quality time’ for the family became another mode of labour for women.⁴¹

As Americans in the late 20th century worked longer employment hours and had less time for leisure activities, this temporal squeeze also put pressure on the time they spent with family.⁴² ‘Quality time’ became a phrase to denote time where (family) relationships were being intentionally cultivated. As Arlie Hochschild points out, this results in a dichotomy between ‘quality time’ and merely ‘quantity’ time—or time that does not sufficiently emphasise cultivating meaningful emotional and/or social connections.⁴³ For the 1980s family, the desire for quality time brushing up against increasing economic demands is characteristic of the elusive ‘good life.’ The Atari ad campaign frames ‘quality time’ as an aspirational structure of feeling that its products can help produce.

One version of the ad features a mother, father, and two kids gathered in front of the electronic hearth laughing and shouting at the television while the dog snoozes. The ad asserts that ‘Atari turns your family room into a *family* room.’⁴⁴ The subtle emphasis on the second ‘family room’ suggests that without Atari, this kind of family togetherness was merely ‘quantity time.’ But now with Atari, this family togetherness is transformed into the sought after ‘quality time.’ The ad campaign as a whole suggests that Atari offers an electronic solution to the issue of ‘quality time’—whether that’s intergenerational, romantic, or friendship oriented. At the same time, ‘quality time’ is still framed as readily available—provided you are a diligent consumer of home electronics.

The evolving popularity of time-management discourses during this era—including the concerted efforts to seek and quantify ‘quality time’—extended the slippage between labour and leisure, namely by extending the logic of time management techniques from professional contexts into social and/or personal experiences. In particular, ideas of quality and leisure time were highly gendered. Women were often expected to facilitate the context for leisure time while also maintaining their other domestic responsibilities.

One version of the ‘Atari today’ ad campaign offers an almost comically pointed example of this phenomenon. The female voiced song in the ad narrates, ‘Way down deep inside of every man, there’s a little boy, an Atari fan.’⁴⁵ A middle-aged white man gleefully moves his hands on the controller while staring at the TV. His middle-aged (although younger than him) white wife looks on lovingly from the doorway. The upbeat song continues, ‘and without any doubt, the boy will come out. When he plays a game from Atari, have you played Atari today?’ The female voice of the song shifts to a male announcer’s voice stating, ‘give a man an Atari game and he’ll turn into a little boy. Don’t worry, he’ll be grown up enough to share it.’ By this point, the wife has rallied their children and the family now sits on the couch as she affectionately pats him on the back. Without ever mentioning the name of a specific game cartridge, the ad then fades to the familiar black screen with the Atari logo and the final jingle reprise, ‘have you played Atari today?’

While the ad’s visual emphasis is squarely on the father, it is telling that closeups of the mother’s reaction are intercut with a song that seems to pointedly hail female—especially maternal—viewers. Not only can Atari assist in intergenerational child care, à la *Berzerk* granny, it can apparently also be used as a tool to draw out and occupy an adult man’s inner child. Indeed, the console’s purported care possibilities extended beyond the ‘Atari Today’ campaign. In the UK, an ad for *Pac-Man* featured a mother telling her son, and her husband, how much time they had left to play Atari before

dinner before she finally serves them a tray meal in front of the television. Similarly a 1981 US ad for Atari video game cartridges shows a mother repeatedly telling telephone callers, ‘No we don’t need a babysitter tonight.’ It is unclear whether this is because so many people are offering babysitting services to gain access to the Atari, or because Atari does such an excellent job of keeping her children entertained that they simply do not require a human caregiver. If facilitating routine family leisure and/or quality time is the purview of adult women, these ads positioned Atari as the ideal technology for them—namely because it supplies both reliable leisure and quality time on a daily basis. The construction of the ‘Atari Today’ ad is such that rather than enjoying Atari herself, this wife’s satisfaction comes from electronically fulfilling the expectations of providing her husband with a leisure routine. More accurate ad copy might be, ‘Has your husband played Atari today?’

This bias on the ideal intersection between women and domestic technology was not unique to Atari. The 1977 Apple II personal computer ad is a picture of a white man in the foreground working on a stock chart at the kitchen table.⁴⁶ His wife looks on lovingly from the sink in the background. They both seemed to be engaged in their daily routines—his just now involves the computer and hers, similar to Atari wife, involves watching him use the computer. The full-page ad speaks for itself with only the words ‘Introducing Apple II’ emblazoned across the top. Some versions of the ad did include a large informational page as a second page. The intent was to emphasise that this new personal computer could easily fit into the daily rhythms of domestic American life—while not so subtly suggesting what those rhythms might be. At the same time, the ad reinforces gendered distinctions of technological labour and knowledge. Given the man’s work, the ad also seems to foreshadow the increasing encroachment of white collar or informational labour into domestic space.

Atari continued to align its products with gendered divisions of domestic labour and routines in another ad from this campaign. The ad begins with a female voice singing, ‘If her Dad is so strong and her Mom is so smart, if a kid knows that at the very start, then why even begin, cause kids always win!’⁴⁷ The camera pans from handsome white Dad reading the newspaper to pretty white Mom reading a book and then down to a young blond girl holding two Atari controllers in her hands. The family is enjoying some shared leisure time together. The girl looks at the controllers and then gently shoves Dad as she hands him one, ‘Wanna play Dad?’ The camera tilts up and to the left, completely cutting the mother out of the frame.

Sociological surveys in the 1980s showed that fathers took on more domestic labour if their wives worked outside of the home.⁴⁸ However, gendered inequities for domestic labour still

persisted.⁴⁹ Women who worked one shift in a workplace outside of the home came home to work a ‘second shift.’ In particular, Hochschild describes how ‘even when couples share more equitably in the work at home, women do two-thirds of the *daily* jobs at home, like cooking and cleaning up—jobs that fix them into a rigid routine.’⁵⁰ Both parents preferred to spend more time with their children but men actually did, while women attended to other household needs. In short, as Hochschild says, ‘men do more of what they’d rather do.’⁵¹ Women were more fixed to daily routines while men had increased access to less scheduled domestic labour that also doubled as quality and/or leisure time—including playing video games with children.

This pattern was even evidenced in *Parents* magazine with articles including “Alone Together.” In the 1990 article, author Alan Gelb recounts needing to stay at home with his nine-year-old son while his wife is away on a business trip with their two-year-old. Gelb describes their household as egalitarian and yet points out that those two weeks would need to be one of lowered standards, because ‘Mom runs a tight ship’ and maintains the daily schedules while he is perceived as the ‘fun’ parent. Particularly relevant here is the role of video and video games—or the cringe-inducing ‘electronic orgy’ as he describes entertaining his son’s friends. Similar to the Atari ad, video and video games seem to draw out this man’s ‘inner child.’ However, the article’s title also suggests the father’s discomfort with being a temporary single parent—a discomfort that is mitigated through electronic caregiving. At the end of the two weeks, both father and son are relieved to have a ‘good woman’ return and restore routine order.⁵²

In this Atari ad, Dad is similarly presented as the obvious parental choice for pursuing leisure time with the Atari. As the daughter and Dad play *Pac-Man*, the ad cuts to a close up of the little girl’s face, shows the television screen with the game itself, and then shows a two shot of the girl and her Dad. Then, the ad makes a jarring jump cut just to the girl’s face. For a second of ad time, the Mom pushes into the frame to cheer them on before the ad cuts back to *Pac-Man* on the television. The camera pans quickly across the three sitting on the couch but settles on the Dad and little girl. This has the effect of, again, cinematographically cropping Mom out of the family leisure activity. As the ad draws to a close, the family cheers and the girl jumps up and hugs her father. As this happens the narrator says, ‘It’s one of the few things children almost always do better than grown ups. Isn’t that nice?’ As the narrator asks this question, the ad briefly freezes on a close up of Dad smiling as he receives his hug before the familiar black screen with Atari logo and a sung ‘have you played Atari today?’ fills the soundscape. This final shot, in combination with the campaign’s repeated tagline and

the pointed exclusion of the mother, emphasises the Dad as the preferable parent for routine fun, leisure, and quality time. The narration of ‘isn’t that nice’ congratulates Dad for taking on childcare without interrogating why the mother—only a couch cushion away—has been relegated to a spectating role in quality time.⁵³ While the question ‘have you played Atari today’ locks Dad into a daily childrearing routine, it’s also one that he’d prefer to do over other domestic tasks. Across the series of ads, Atari extended gendered divisions of care that were evidenced from sociological surveys to popular parenting magazines. Positioning women as caregivers might have contained conservative anxieties as more women worked outside the home. At the same time, the ads appealed to women with increasing responsibilities that Atari might be a useful tool to offset their domestic labour.⁵⁴

Who Can Play Atari Today?

Although many of the ads in this campaign frame Atari as a resource for childcare, three ads in the series meaningfully depart from the others. A 1982 ad that centres around a Black woman and her young daughter playing *Demons to Diamonds* is particularly important.⁵⁵ This ad’s departure from the remainder of the ‘have you played Atari today’ ads merits reflection in an effort to reveal what Laine Nooney calls ‘historical textures.’⁵⁶ In short, these textures offer us unique or curious insight without necessarily speaking to broader patterns of representation or use. The ad is the only one from this series that features a Black woman and her daughter.⁵⁷ Similar to the *Berzerk* ad, the young girl in this ad suggests to her mother that they play Atari. But rather than featuring an upbeat song about *Demons to Diamonds*, the ad has a male voiceover that slowly explains that this is a game for the ‘Atari video computer system, your parents hook it up to the tv.’ The girl proceeds to explain the game to her mother as they play it. Again like the *Berzerk* commercial, the action concludes by cutting to an Atari system on a blank background. This time though, it is not designated as the Atari 2600, the narrator merely names it a ‘video computer system.’ The screen finally cuts to the familiar Atari logo as a slower instrumental version of the familiar jingle plays.

The only other ads that follow this narration feature young white girls with their grandfather in one, and Uncle in the other. The grandfather, played by Will Lee, would have been recognizable to children as the popular Mr. Hooper from *Sesame Street*.⁵⁸ Unlike *Berzerk* Grandma, who knows the bike route to the video arcade, Grandpa asks, ‘Pac-Man, who’s he?’ While Uncle Frank ducks, ‘Space invaders, where?!’ The language of the ads aligns the younger Black mother with the older

white men in terms of their assumed lack of video game knowledge. The voiceover scripts are identical except for changing out *Demons to Diamonds* for *Pac-Man*. The gameplay mechanics even seem distinctly gender neutral. The only thing codifying *Demons to Diamonds* as ‘female’ is the fact that demons transform into a girl’s best friend—diamonds—as they are shot. It’s unclear what accounts for this tonal and musical difference in ads that targeted young girls and Black women. Presuming that white Granny could translate *Berzerk* from the video arcade to home console yet this Black mother needed to be instructed to plug in the Atari home system seems condescending to say the least. At a minimum, these ads reveal Atari’s uncertainty toward Black women and female children as potential consumers. In particular, the tone of these two commercials suggests a heightened didacticism compared to other ads in the campaign. While this may seem like a progressive move to inclusivity, this approach is in some ways anachronistic.⁵⁹ More young girls (of all races) and Black women than white septuagenarians frequented video arcades.⁶⁰

Although Atari clearly wanted to hail Black women and girls as potential consumers, the ad also seems unsure about whether Black women would make regular use of the gaming system. Unlike other ads in the campaign, this ad does not assume prior knowledge of video gaming systems. The question ‘have you played Atari today’ is not sung, instead it is only hinted at through using the same tune of that jingle over the Atari logo at the end. For a consumer to recognize the question about habitual use is therefore contingent on prior knowledge of the ad campaign. In this way, Atari does not overcommit to asking Black women and girls to incorporate Atari into their daily routine. Instead, it settles for presenting them with information about the technology and avoids telling them, as potential consumers, that they ought to play video games today or routinely at all. The ambivalence in this ad implicitly questions Black consumers’ access to the more aspirational representations of the technologically inflected ‘good life’ represented in many of the other ads.

Atari’s perception of Black consumers reflected and reinforced the differing labour concerns, responsibilities, and opportunities of Black women from their white counterparts during the electronic era. Bringing the computer home—and then using it daily—was not necessarily as attainable for Black workers who earned less money on the dollar and experienced increased stagnated wages in comparison to their white counterparts.⁶¹ Black women were also more likely to work full time or longer hours than were white women.⁶² As a result, Black women may have spent less time at home and had differing leisure time habits.⁶³ Despite the neoliberal cultural shift from

productivity to consumption that Nikolas Rose asserts, here, Black women's increased productivity hours did not translate to being hailed as consumers.⁶⁴

While the early video game industry imploded and Atari was ultimately sold off piecemeal shortly after these advertisements aired, the gendered technological leisure routines that Atari imagined through this ad campaign continued and proliferated.⁶⁵ In the 2000s, Jesper Juul called this phenomenon 'casual gaming.'⁶⁶ The introduction of his book features images of Wii gaming Grannies who would have been in step with *Berzerk* Granny twenty-five years earlier. Although class remains a meaningful barrier to access, the central appeal of casual or ordinary electronic technology use continues to be the promise of reliable electronic modes of play, sociality, and leisure.

Conclusion

The 'Have You Played Atari Today' ad campaign seems like unimportant, albeit fun, retro ephemera. However, my approach reveals that using questions of routine and ordinary life to analyse popular discourse can help reveal the ways that people, and women in particular, were invited to understand their technological horizon during the electronic era. Habit—or routines—is a slippery framework, as objects and activities that are well integrated into everyday life typically go unnoticed. But repetitive connections between people and their technology are conditioned, including through cultural discourse such as advertisements, however natural they may seem or feel. In particular, both labour and leisure time shaped, and were shaped by, the possibilities of emerging technology. The emphasis on habit, labour, and leisure frames early video gaming as a precursor to our current digital moment. Analysing this ad campaign and its promise of everyday (both in the sense of daily and ordinary) leisure through consumer electronics—rather than the games themselves or their designers—reveals how emerging technology was intertwined with a burgeoning normalisation of neoliberalism and an extension of gendered and raced expectations. Ultimately, I propose that questions drawn from current new media and cultural theory offer a vital framework for understanding the integral role social identity and cultural attitudes play in discourse histories of technology.

This ad campaign exemplifies how discourse that framed technology in everyday life re-tooled attitudes and rhetoric from the increasingly popular self and time management literature of the late 20th century. By analysing the Atari ads through this lens, I argue that the biases of neoliberalism and self management, including the growing slippage between leisure and labour, repeatedly animated

discussions of how and why emerging technology should fit into potential consumers' everyday routines. By inviting consumers to take part in a daily leisure routine, Atari signalled—amid an American contraction in available leisure time—that leisure was not necessarily habitual. Atari invited the audience to schedule and manage a prospective leisure routine—namely by playing Atari video games. Indeed, the campaign's repeated call to play Atari today aligned with neoliberal discourses about cultivating routine—in particular by representing a distinctly temporal and cyclical mode of leisure. Being attentive to the neoliberal rhetoric used to imagine future routines suggests a technological facet to the broader fantasies of the 'good life.' At the same time, the aspirational temporal logic underlying this series of ads offers us perspective into how precarious labour and leisure in everyday life already was in the early 1980s.

Rather than imagining emerging electronics as disruptive to the gendered disparities of daily routines, Atari's campaign often positioned its products as technologies that would simply extend the status quo. Carly A. Kocurek has written that feminist video game *histories* are necessary yet remain understudied.⁶⁷ My article's interrogation of the role of social identity contributes to a growing group of scholars, including Reem Hilu and Nooney, who each consider how the emergence of home computing and video games in the 1970s and 1980s was intertwined with the rhythms of women, girls, and family life.⁶⁸ However, my approach shifts away from analysing hobbyist publications and the technology themselves to instead interrogate how representations of everyday life invited potential consumers to imagine their technological horizons.

Stagnant representations of social identity, alongside the rhetoric of neoliberalism and habit, were prevalent marketing approaches for playing the Atari 2600 today and keeping up with the Commodore 64. In my own work, I continue to expand this cultural framing into analyses of contemporaneous representations of video gaming, computers, and video in film, television, and popular magazines. These cultural texts often made little distinction between particular brands, makes, or consoles. Future research is needed to extend these frameworks of analysis to contend with more specificity to respective consoles or companies.⁶⁹ Other approaches to research might also include an increased use of sociological data to determine how actual user uptake corresponded with marketing and popular discourse. Here, I move to reconsider how the broader emergence of electronic technologies, despite seeming ordinary, often glosses over the messy tensions of what Berlant has described as a state of late capitalist 'crisis.' Playing Atari today was an early rehearsal for the ongoing

slippage between labour and leisure that continues to characterise the push for daily digital media engagement.

Notes

1. Commodore, “Are You Keeping Up With the Commodore?” television advertisement from 1983, YouTube video, 1:00, August 14, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=95cGh9EeMIY>.
2. “Money-Making Careers for the 1980s,” *Ebony*, March 1980, 25–28, 31; Margery Eagan, “Hot Jobs for the 90s,” *Woman’s Day*, October 27, 1987, 38–38, 53, 55.
3. Advertisement, Atari, *Parents*, November 1983, 28–29; Advertisement, Atari, *Woman’s Day*, November 15, 1983, 119.
4. Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press), 8–9, 101; Wendy Chun, *Updating to Remain the Same* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2016), 3.
5. Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 3.
6. Kris Cohen and Scott C. Richmond, “New Histories of Computational Personhood: An Introduction,” *JCMS* 61, no. 4 (Summer 2022): 158–162.
7. Lynn Spigel, *Make Room for TV* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 2; Jesper Verhoef, “The cultural-historical value of and problems with digitized advertisements. Historical newspapers and the portable radio, 1950–1969,” *Tijdschrift voor Tijdschriftstudies* 38, (2015): 51–52.
8. Shira Chess describes this imagined, aggregate, would-be technology user as a ‘designed identity’ that is especially prevalent in the address to feminine audiences. See: Shira Chess, *Ready Player Two* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 5, 24, 31.
9. See also: Spigel, *Make Room for TV*.
10. Aubrey Anable, *Playing With Feelings* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), 91–92. Bernadette Flynn also argues that video game consoles increasingly serve to erode distinctions between work and leisure. See: Bernadette Flynn, “Geography of the Digital Hearth,” *Information Communication & Society* 6, no. 4 (2003): 573.
11. Melissa Gregg “Getting things done: productivity, self management, and the order of things,” in *Networked Affect*, eds. Ken Hillis, Susanna Paasonen and Michael Petit (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2015), 190.
12. Chun, *Updating To Remain the Same*, 1.

13. See: Carly A. Kocurek, *Coin-Operated Americans* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015); Michael Z. Newman, *Atari Age* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2017), 120; Amanda C. Cote, *Gaming Sexism* (New York City: New York University Press, 2020), 5; Nick Montfort and Ian Bogost, *Racing the Beam: The Atari Video Computer System* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2009), 6; Roberto Dillon, *The Golden Age of Video Games: The Birth of a Multi-Billion Dollar Industry* (Boca Raton: CRC Press, 2011), 21.
14. See: Chess, *Ready Player Two*; and Alison Harvey, *Gender, Age, and Digital Games in the Domestic Context* (New York City: Routledge, 2015).
15. Stephen Covey, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* (New York City: Simon & Schuster, 1989).
16. Ruha Benjamin, *Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019), 2.
17. Juliet Schor, *The Overworked American: The Unexpected Decline of Leisure* (New York City: BasicBooks, 1991), 5.
18. “The Electronically Enhanced Lifestyle,” *Cosmopolitan*, November 1983, 243–244, 246, 248–249.
19. Finding reliable sources on dates has been sketchy, but the ads seem to have been released between 1980 and 1982, prior to Atari’s financial woes amid the crumbling video game market.
20. Atari, “Product Release,” January 6, 1982, <https://archive.org/details/haveyouplayedagamefromataritoday/mode/2up>.
21. While I have not been able to find a comprehensive list of commercials produced that use the jingle, having cross referenced materials from Kay Savetz, program manager at the Internet Archive and host of *Antic: The Atari 8-Bit Podcast*, and an article on this jingle by Williams Gibbons, I believe that these numbers are accurate, if approximate. See: William Gibbons, ““Have You Played Atari Today?”: Music and Audience in an Early Video Game Advertising Campaign,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Music and Advertising*, eds. James Deaville, Siu-Lan Tan and Ron Rodman (New York City: Oxford University Press, 2021), 327.
22. Sara Ahmed, *What’s the Use* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 12; Clare Carlisle, *On Habit* (London: Routledge, 2014), 25–26.
23. Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, Second Edition,” in *Walter Benjamin Selected Writings Volume 3 1935–1938*, eds. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, trans. Edmund Jephcott, Howard Eiland and others (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002), 107–108; Paul Roquet, *Ambient Media: Japanese Atmospheres of Self* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 14; James J. Hodge, “Sociable Media,” *Postmodern Culture* 26, no. 1 (September 2015).
24. Ben Highmore, *Ordinary Lives: Studies in the Everyday* (London: Routledge, 2011), 128.

25. Rita Felski, *Doing Time* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 21.
26. Robin Norwood, *Women Who Love Too Much* (New York City: Pocket Books, 1985), 220.
27. Tony Robbins, *Unlimited Power: The New Science of Personal Achievement* (New York City: Free Press, 1986).
28. Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 10.
29. Brian Tracy, *Eat That Frog! 21 Great Ways to Stop Procrastinating and Get More Done in Less Time*, 2001; Covey, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*.
30. Louise L. Hay, *You Can Heal Your Life* (Hay House Inc., 1984), 1, 105–106.
31. Gregg, “Getting Things Done,” 190.
32. Melissa Gregg, *Counterproductive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 60.
33. Chess, *Ready Player Two*, 61–62.
34. Atari, “Have You Played Atari Today: Berzerk,” television advertisement from 1982, YouTube video, 0:31, January 4, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HHIYWY1dcqs>.
35. For example see: Ann Cvetkovich, *Depression* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 192–193; Rita Felski, “The Invention of Everyday Life,” *New Formations: A Journal of Culture/Theory/Politics*, no. 3 (Winter 1999): 26; Arlie Hochschild, *The Second Shift* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1989), 8.
36. Mark Weiser, “The Computer for the 21st Century,” *Scientific American*, September 1991, 94.
37. Schor, *The Overworked American*, 14.
38. In *Make Room for TV*, Spiegel describes how the television was similarly framed as a “new family hearth,” during the post war era. See also: Newman, *Atari Age*, 45; Flynn, “Geography,” 574; John Vanderhoef, “Casual Threats: The Feminization of Casual Video Games,” *Ada: Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology*, no. 2 (2013).
39. Felski, “Invention of Everyday Life,” 26; Felski, *Doing Time*, 20.
40. Felski, *Doing Time*, 20.
41. Arlie Hochschild, *The Time Bind* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1997), 71–72.; See also: Chess, *Ready Player Two*, 19–20.
42. Schor, *The Overworked American*, 11–12, 20.
43. Hochschild, *The Time Bind*, 71–72.
44. Atari, “Have You Played Atari Today: Family Room,” television advertisement from 1981, YouTube video, 0:28, October 27, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XMFy-Iw4CcA>.
45. Atari, “Have You Played Atari Today: Breakout,” television advertisement from 1982, YouTube video, 0:30, November 30, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MmBmZkmlbOQ>.

46. David Sims, "How Apple and IBM Marketed the First Personal Computers," *The Atlantic* (June 2015), <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2015/06/clear-the-kitchen-table-how-apple-and-ibm-marketed-the-first-personal-computers/396047/>.
47. Atari, "Have You Played Atari Today: Kids Always Win," television advertisement from 1981, YouTube video, 0:30, November 5, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TqmMhmwja-k>.
48. Schor, *The Overworked American*, 103–104.
49. See: Ruth Schwartz Cowan, *More Work For Mother: The Ironies of Household Technology from the Open Hearth to the Microwave*, with new preface (Basic Books, 1983; London: Free Association Books, 1989), 193. Citation refers to 1989 edition; Silvia Federici, "The Restructuring of Social Reproduction in the United States in the 1970s," *The Commoner* 11 (Spring 2006): 81.
50. Hochschild, *The Second Shift*, 8.
51. Hochschild, *The Second Shift*, 9.
52. Alan Gelb, "Alone Together," *Parents*, January 1990, 119.
53. Marsha F. Cassidy describes a consistent pattern in popular discourse on computing more generally in the 1990s that framed men as assisting with household labour through childcare with the new addition of the computer. See: Cassidy, "Cyberspace Meets Domestic Space," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 18, no. 1 (March 2001): 53.
54. Nick Dyer-Witherford also makes this suggestion about early video games more broadly as they coincided with larger shifts around gender, labour, and family structure. See: Nick Dyer-Witherford, *Games of Empire*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009): 19–20.
55. Atari, "Have You Played Atari Today: Demons to Diamonds," television advertisement from 1982, YouTube video, 0:30, November 30, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iAQ4p6w23gE>.
56. Laine Nooney, "A Pedestal, A Table, A Love Letter," *Game Studies* 13, no. 2 (December 2013).; See also: Carly A. Kocurek, "Editor's Introduction: It Isn't Difficult to Find Feminist Game Studies, but Can We Find a Feminist Game History," *Feminist Media Histories* 6, no. 1 (January 2020): 3.
57. I could not find a comprehensive list of ads in the series, but I believe that I have reviewed all of them, see note 20.
58. Michael Davis, *Street Gang: The Complete History of Sesame Street* (New York City: Viking, 2008), 280.
59. Chess describes the Nintendo Knitting Machine's similarly misfired marketing approach to inclusivity that hailed girls as would be gamers while simultaneously reinscribing some gendered expectations. See: Chess, *Ready Player Two*, 3–4.

60. While arcade demographic statistics are scant, archival photographs and playing guides offer some evidence of player gender, race, and age. See: *How to Win Video Games* (Simon & Schuster, 1982), 82–90; Cat Despira, “Buried Arcade History,” *Retrobitch*, <https://retrobitch.wordpress.com/2018/11/03/buried-arcade-history-newspaper-photos-from-the-video-craze-that-deserve-to-be-seen-again-2/>; Stanford Libraries, “Bay Area video arcades: photographs by Ira Nowinski, 1981–1982,” <https://searchworks.stanford.edu/catalog?f%5Bcollection%5D%5B%5D=9685083>; Denver Public Library, “Video Game Arcades: The Hottest Thing Walking in Early 1980s Denver,” <https://history.denverlibrary.org/news/video-arcades>.
61. United States Census, “Historical Income Tables: People,” <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/income-poverty/historical-income-people.html>; Becky Pettit and Stephanie Ewert, “Employment Gains and Wage Declines: The Erosion of Black Women’s Relative Wages Since 1980,” *Demography* 46, no. 3 (August 2009): 469–492.
62. Vernon Brundage Jr., “Labor Market Activity of Blacks in the United States,” *US Bureau of Labor Statistics* (February 2020), 10, <https://www.bls.gov/spotlight/2020/african-american-history-month/pdf/african-american-history-month.pdf>.
63. Schor, *The Overworked American*, 13.
64. Nikolas Rose, *Governing the Soul: The Shaping of the Private Self*, 2nd ed. (London: Free Association Books, 1999), 103.
65. See: Dillon, *The Golden Age of Video Games*; Montfort and Bogost, *Racing the Beam: The Atari Video Computer System*.
66. Jesper Juul, *A Casual Revolution* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2009).
67. Kocurek, “Editor’s Introduction,” 6.
68. See: Reem Hilu, “Girl Talk and Girl Tech: Computer Talking Dolls and the Sounds of Girls Play,” *The Velvet Light Trap* 78 (Fall 2016): 4–21; Nooney, “A Pedestal,”; Laine Nooney, Kevin Driscoll and Kera Allen, “From Programming to Products: *Softalk* Magazine and the Rise of the Personal Computer User,” *Information and Culture* 55, no. 2 (2020): 105–129; Laine Nooney, *The Apple II Age: How the Computer Became Personal* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2023), 179–218.
69. For more on the need for console specific research see: Jesper Verhoef, “Let’s not be Cultural Pessimists: The Social Construction of Nintendo’s Game Boy and the Need for Console-Specific Game Studies,” *Game Studies* 23, no. 2 (2023).

Biography

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