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A Visual History of Racing Games

From low res to high speed, racing games have come a long way.



BY [SETH G. MACY](#)

UPDATED: SEP 6, 2017 6:53 PM

POSTED: MAR 27, 2015 6:31 PM

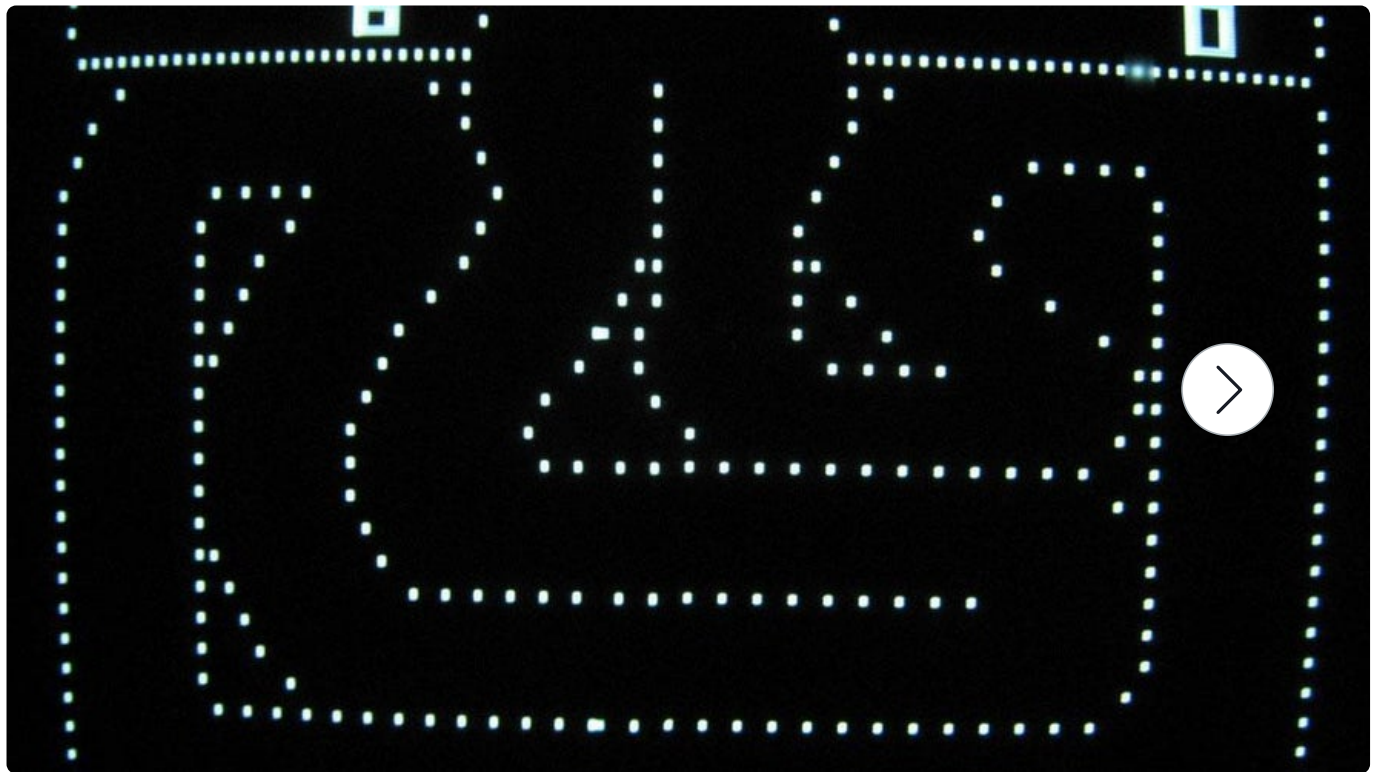
UPDATED 9/27/16: *The visual evolution of racing games is varied, with many off-shoots and constant improvements. Since this article first appeared, we've added two more entries to the list.*

Today's beautifully rendered racing games, with their licensed cars and amazing attention to detail, are a continuation of one of gaming's oldest genres. Back in 1974, Taito's Speed Race featured black and white graphics of a blocky on a vertically scrolling road. Interest in the genre meant racing games were able to evolve with gaming since the very beginning, with breakthroughs coming with each console generation.

As was the case for most games, the best graphics could be found in the arcades. Sit-down multiplayer cabinets and gearshifts, steering wheels, and pedals added further to the realism. However, as the price of advanced hardware fell, so did interest in arcades. Eventually the home console experience would reach parity with the arcade experience. While capturing the "feel" of driving is something that was best done in an arcade cabinet designed to simulate a car seat, today's racing games easily match the graphical fidelity once only found in the most advanced and expensive arcade games.

Click on the right arrow in the slideshow below, or scroll down to see each game.

A Visual History of Racing Games

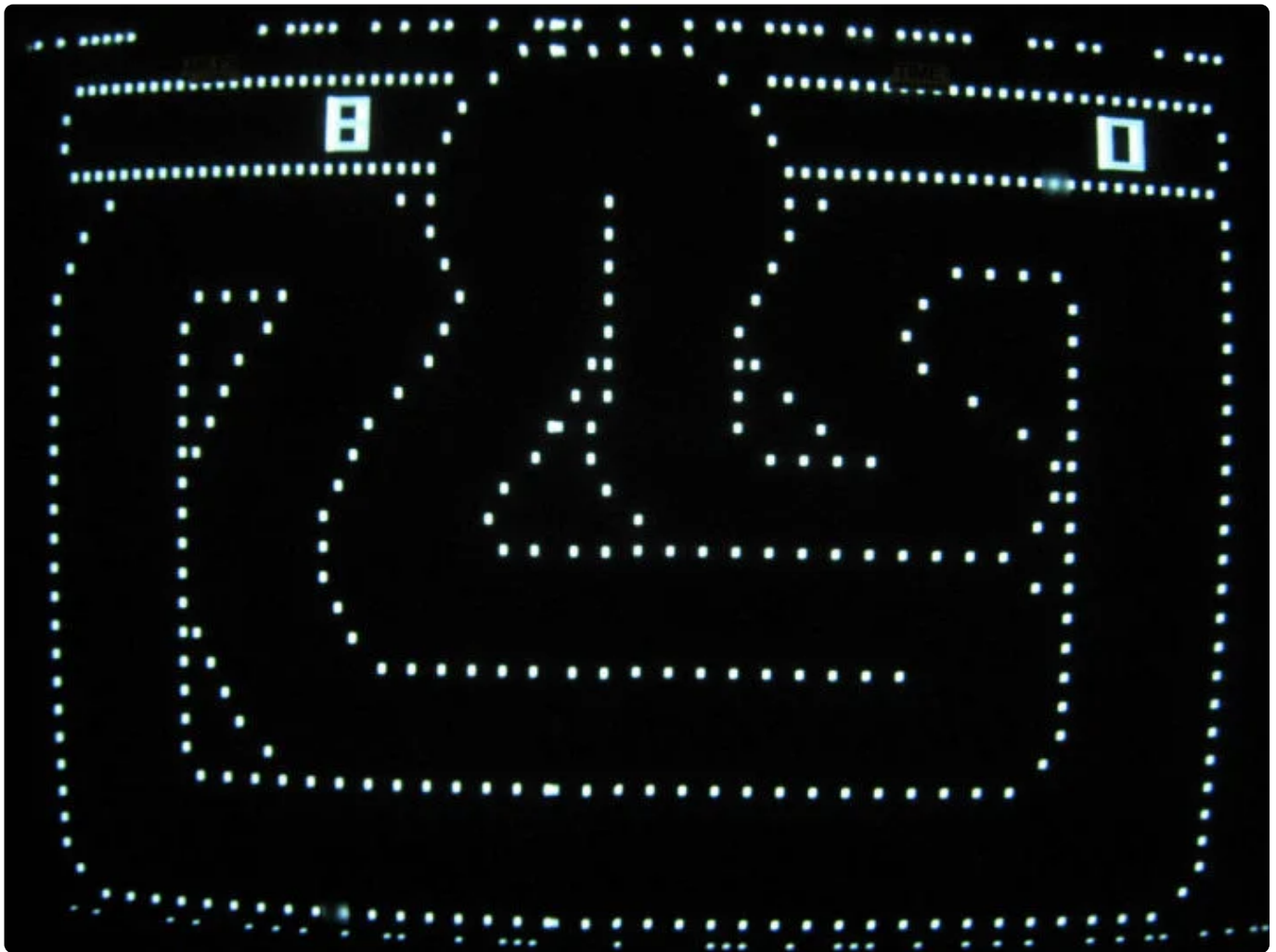


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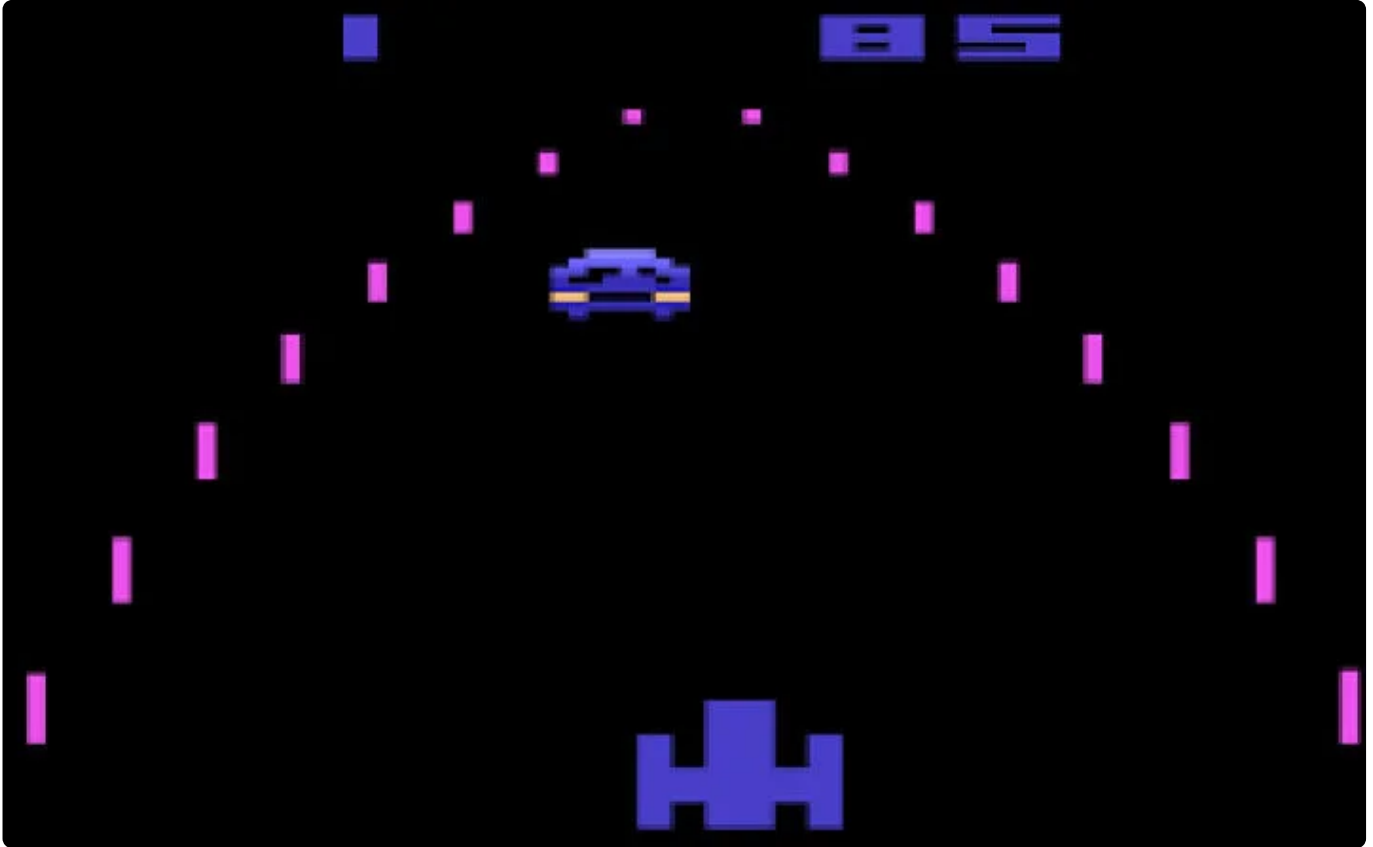
Gran Trak 10 (1974)

This black-and-white top-down racer was Atari's 1974 entry into the world of racing games. The beastly cabinet weighed over 400 pounds and the graphics were extremely limited, as can be seen. The white dots trace the borders of the track, and players must avoid hitting the dots with their steering-wheel controlled car sprite.



Night Driver (1976 Arcade, 1978 Atari 2600)

Night Driver was notable because it was the first driving game to feature a behind-the-car view, something that would become common in racing games and would eventually lead to first-person and dashboard views. If you squint a little you can almost see how the 2600 graphics approximate the thrills of driving after the sun goes down.

**Rally X (1980)**

Rally X from Namco was a top down, multi-directional racing game with multiple paths and opposing racers. The object was to race through the streets collecting flags and avoiding contact with other cars. It also featured a "radar" and a finite fuel supply.



Pole Position (1982)

This Namco arcade racer was one of the most influential racing games of all time. It was so popular that it even spawned a Saturday morning cartoon. The bright, third-person view graphics and smoothness of motion set the standard for racing games. The 2600 version of the game looked typical of 2600 arcade ports, but still managed to do a sort-of decent approximation.



Hang On (1985)

SEGA's Hang On took the third person view of arcade racers and substituted a motorcycle for a race car. Even cooler, the arcade cabinet was controlled by a motorcycle controller players would sit on and use to lean into turns. It featured SEGA's "Super Scaler" sprite technology, along with gorgeous, colorful 16-bit sprites.



RC Pro-Am (1987)

Rare Ltd. developed the 3/4 view radio-controlled racer for the Nintendo Entertainment System known as RC Pro-Am was one of many racing games that would come to the NES. The tracks weren't contained to one static screen, but rather scrolled along with the cars.



Hard Drivin' (1989)

Hard Drivin' was one of the first racers to feature polygonal graphics. The driving was true to its name, and the home version could have easily been called "Impossible Drivin'." The relatively simple polygons of the time still required an awful lot of the SEGA Genesis console, and most players spent their time either trying to run over the low-res cow or crashing as spectacularly as possible.



Super Mario Kart (1992)

Super Mario Kart for the Super NES spawned a hugely successful series of games, as well as clones and knock-offs. Using the Super Nintendo's "Mode 7 scaling" to simulate movement along a three-dimensional plane (a technique used expertly in F-Zero for SNES, as well), Super Mario Kart brought Nintendo's Mario characters out of the side-scrolling world of the Mushroom Kingdom and into the high-paced world of kart racing.



Daytona USA (1993)

Daytona USA was another SEGA polygonal racing game, and went head to head against Namco's Ridge Racer introduced into arcades that same year. Daytona was more detailed than its Virtua Racer predecessor, and deluxe versions of the cabinet featured 8 players racing head-to-head. It was also one of the highest grossing arcade games of all time and is a fantastic example of an "arcade racer."



Stunt Race FX (1994)

Stunt Race FX (1994) The second game to take advantage of the Super FX chip, Stunt Race FX is a cartoonish, colorful 3D racer that looks positively primitive by today's standards. The fact it runs on Super NES is a testament to just how clever the Super FX chip was at squeezing out polygonal graphics from a relatively primitive machine. Several different vehicles could be selected and mini-games opened up between races to shake things up.



Ridge Racer (1994, PS1)

Namco's arcade racer was one of the original PlayStation launch titles, coming to Japan in 1994 and North America and Europe the following year. With graphics fast approaching "arcade quality" thanks to the original PlayStation and its focus on 3D graphics.



Gran Turismo (1997)

Gran Turismo was more than just a driving game-- it was a driving simulator. A focus on realistic driving and handling, coupled with an enormous selection of real-world cars, shifted the focus of driving games away from arcade-style racers. The original PlayStation Gran Turismo had two modes: an arcade mode and a simulation mode.



Gran Turismo 3: A-Spec (2001)

If Gran Turismo made a splash in the world of racing games, Gran Turismo 3 left a crater. The game, which is one of the best-selling video games of all time, introduced even more realistic racing graphics and tracks to the series.



Forza Motorsport (2005)

Often seen as the original Xbox's answer to Gran Turismo, Forza Motorsport followed the familiar trajectory of increasingly realistic racing in video games. From car models to handling, the gains in hardware power afforded to developers meant that each game could offer much more than its predecessor. Forza Motorsport was the first entry into the Forza series and sold over 10 million copies.



Burnout Paradise (2008)

The Burnout series had long been less about simulation and more about stunts and wrecks, but with Burnout Paradise, the series reached its graphical peak. No actual cars were harmed in the ensuing chaos, but nods and winks at existing brands and models were heavy. The speed of the game, the detailed car models, and the satisfying slow-motion crashes make it a pleasure to look at.



Gran Turismo 6 (2013)

After much hype and anticipation, Gran Turismo 6 came to the PS3 and continued to build upon the Gran Turismo formula laid down by earlier games in the series. The sixth entry improved further on the car models and higher fidelity of the graphics first seen on PS3 in GT5 in 2010.



Forza Horizon 2 (2014)

Forza Horizon 2 continued the Forza offshoot with improved graphics and a balance struck between arcade and simulation style gameplay. Arguably the best looking racer of its time, Forza Horizon 2 showed off wonderfully how far racing games had come when it first released on Xbox One in 2014, and the more recent Forza Horizon 3 takes the realism further still.



Project CARS (2015)

Unlike its contemporaries in Forza and Gran Turismo, Project CARS is a no-frills racing sim. Car customization and collection is minimized in favor of an even more realistic approach to physics and driving mechanics. The game also looks incredible, marching forward with the graphical leap afforded by the PS4, Xbox One, and modern PCs. The glint of sunlight off a freshly waxed paint job is a world away from the simple white dots that once stood in for track borders.



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Video game graphics continue to improve, and racing games are a fantastic place to show off a console or PC's muscle. Unlike human models, there's no complex texturing or animation required. There's no uncanny valley. Racing games show off scenery and automobiles in an ever increasingly realistic fashion, and it's exciting to think about what the genre will look like in another 40 years.

Seth Macy is a freelance writer who just wants to be your friend. Follow him on Twitter [@sethmacy](#), and MyIGN at [sethgmacy](#), or check out [Seth Macy Photography on Flickr](#).

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SEGA-AM2 DEC 30, 1994



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But still, that game is in the memory of many fans.

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dude_rocks ...

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Dirt? WRC? Collin McRae Rally? Nascar? NFS? Not a very good article. You could change the title to "a visual history of arcade and sim racing games". You completely left out rallies and underground racing.

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Sad_State_of_Gaming ...

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Dizzy made it to the shores, but never took off. I've played and enjoyed two of them. I don't remember which ones.

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Test Drive 5 is still my favorite racing game soundtrack...

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the_atm

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Was anything noteworthy between those years?

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Gran Turismo 3 came with the PS2 bundle that my brother and I bought. We were so amazed by that thing. Some other racing gems: Sega Rally, Need for Speed III Hot Pursuit, Need For Speed Hot Pursuit 2, and Grid.

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Silktrocity

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You were talking about fanboys. And making accusations based on your opinion.

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teddiboi

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I remember the first racing game I played was Zippy Race. Last gen, I played a lot of GT6 and Forza 4. This gen, Forza 5.

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- justinn.everitt

1 April, 2015

Uhhh... That was supposed to say half baked... lol

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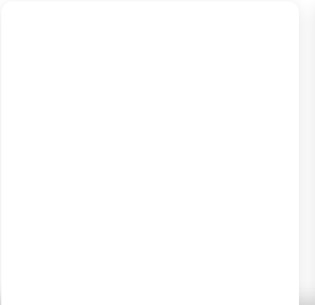
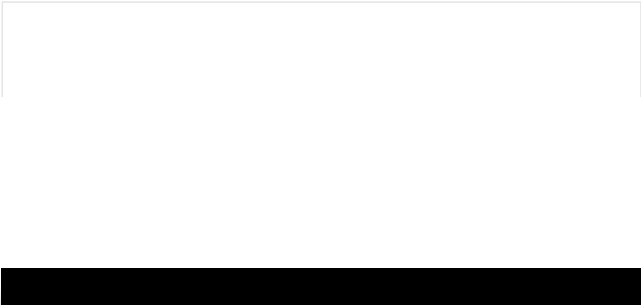
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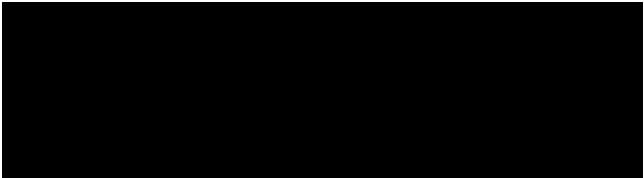
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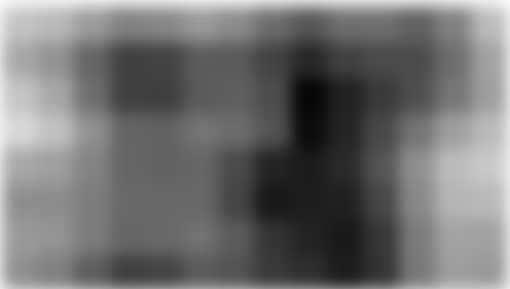


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