

The Rise of Video Games: A Story of Pong, Pac-Man, and a Plumber Named Mario

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Once upon a time, in the 1970s, before smartphones and fancy graphics, there were just a few video games, and they weren't in people's homes—they were in arcades. Imagine a big room filled with bright lights and loud beeps, where kids would line up with their pockets full of quarters.

The story of video games really took off with a simple game called **Pong**. It was just a little white dot bouncing between two lines on a screen, like a game of table tennis. But people were amazed! They had never seen anything like it. Pong machines were placed in bars and arcades, and they became so popular that they sometimes made more money than the jukeboxes!

After Pong, a new hero emerged from Japan. A pizza with a slice missing inspired a yellow, chomping hero named **Pac-Man**. Pac-Man had a simple mission: eat all the dots while avoiding four pesky ghosts named Blinky, Pinky, Inky, and Clyde. Pac-Man wasn't just a game; it was a cultural sensation. People wore Pac-Man t-shirts, ate Pac-Man cereal, and even had a hit song about him. Pac-Man showed the world that video games could be more than just a bouncing ball—they could be a big, fun adventure.

But here's where the story gets really interesting. Many companies wanted to be the next big thing, so they rushed to make their own game consoles. The market was flooded with bad games, and people got tired of them. It was a dark time for video games. It looked like the fun was over.

Then, a new hero appeared from Japan to save the day: **Nintendo**!

Nintendo introduced a home console called the Nintendo Entertainment System, or NES. It came with a little grey box and a game called **Super Mario Bros.** This was a game-changer! Players could control a tiny, brave plumber named Mario who ran, jumped, and stomped his way through a magical world to save a princess. The game had a real story, levels to explore, and a fun world that players couldn't get enough of.

With Mario, video games jumped out of the arcades and into people's living rooms. Friends and families would gather around the TV, taking turns trying to beat the next level. Mario and his friends, Donkey Kong and Link from *The Legend of Zelda*, became household names.

From then on, the video game world exploded. We got faster consoles, incredible graphics, and games with stories as epic as movies. But it all started with a simple game of Pong, a hungry yellow circle, and a brave little plumber who showed the world that the fun was just beginning.

If you are old enough like me to remember Pong first coming out, you are old!

Here are some tools that might be handy for classroom learning.

1. Using Educational Games in the Classroom

This is the most direct way to celebrate the day. Many video games are specifically designed to teach academic subjects in a fun, interactive format.

- **For Math and Science:**
 - **Prodigy:** A popular and free online math game where students answer curriculum-aligned questions to progress through a fantasy world. It's a great tool for practice and differentiation.
 - **Legends of Learning:** Offers a wide variety of science and math games aligned with state standards for elementary and middle school students.
 - **Minecraft: Education Edition:** This version of the popular building game has lesson plans and a special library of activities for subjects ranging from biology to history, encouraging problem-solving and collaboration.
 - **Kerbal Space Program:** A physics-based simulation that teaches students about aerospace engineering, physics, and mathematics as they design and launch rockets. Best for middle school and up.
- **For Language Arts and Social Studies:**
 - **Valiant Hearts: The Great War:** A powerful adventure game that teaches students about World War I through interactive storytelling and puzzles, helping to build empathy and historical understanding.
 - **The Oregon Trail:** A classic game that immerses students in the challenges of 19th-century westward expansion, teaching them about history and resource management.
 - **Mission US:** A series of free, interactive games that put students in the shoes of historical figures at key moments in U.S. history.

2. Gamifying the Classroom and Lessons

Beyond playing specific educational games, teachers can adopt principles from video games to make their regular lessons more engaging.

- **Create a "Quest" or "Level-Up" System:** Frame your daily assignments as quests, and a series of completed quests leads to a "level up." This can be a fun way to track progress, replacing or supplementing traditional grading.
- **Use "XP" instead of Points:** Award experience points (XP) for completed assignments, good behavior, or classroom participation. When students accumulate enough XP, they can unlock "rewards" like extra free time or a "bonus" homework pass.
- **Host a "Game Jam":** Challenge students to work in teams to design their own educational game. This can be done with simple paper and pencil, or with free,

user-friendly game-making software like Scratch. This activity teaches storytelling, logic, problem-solving, and collaboration.

3. Integrating Video Games into Class Discussions and Assignments

- **Critical Thinking and Media Literacy:**
 - Have students analyze a video game's design. What makes it fun or challenging? How does the game's music, art, and story work together? What skills does it require (e.g., problem-solving, spatial awareness, strategy)?
 - Discuss the societal impact of video games. This could include a debate on topics like "the role of video games in a healthy lifestyle" or "how video games can promote teamwork."
 - Explore career paths in the video game industry, from coding and art to writing and sound design.
- **Writing and Creative Expression:**
 - **Writing Prompts:**
 - "Design your own video game. Describe the main character, the setting, and the main goal. What are the 'boss battles' and how does the game teach a lesson?"
 - "Write a narrative from the perspective of a character in your favorite video game. What are they thinking and feeling as they face a major challenge?"
 - "Compare and contrast the hero's journey in a video game with a story you've read in class."

4. Practical Tools and Platforms

- **Digital Whiteboards (e.g., Jamboard, Miro):** Use these to brainstorm video game ideas as a class, creating a shared space for students to add characters, levels, and rules.
- **Kahoot! or Quizizz:** These are "game-like" quiz platforms that are perfect for a fun, competitive review session.
- **Bloxels:** A physical block set and app that allows students to design their own video games without any coding. This is a great tool for hands-on, project-based learning.

By thoughtfully incorporating these tools and activities, teachers can transform [National Video Games Day](#) from a simple celebration into a meaningful learning experience that meets students where they are.