

TOKEN APPRECIATION

by Rob O'Hara



Chicago-based Gottlieb was no newcomer to the field of electronic entertainment when they waded into the coin-operated arcade market. Originally formed in 1927, Gottlieb released their first three "mechanical pinball" machines in 1931, and released dozens of popular pinball machines over the next several decades. As the pinball craze flourished in the late 1970s, Gottlieb increased production and released several tables now considered to be classics, including Royal Flush, Solar Ride, and Black Hole. Gottlieb had great success in the world of pinball, but when new arcade games like Space Invaders (1978) and Pac-Man (1980) began competing for players' quarters, Gottlieb decided to enter coin-op arcade game market as well. While their first two ventures (1980's "No Man's Land" and "New York, New York") weren't exactly best sellers, they turned enough of a profit to keep Gottlieb interested in the industry. Two years later, Gottlieb returned with their most iconic arcade game: 1982's Q*bert.



Q*bert actually began as a drawing by Gottlieb employee Jeff Lee, inspired by M.C. Escher. Lee, a long time artist, filled his blocky pyramid drawing with whimsical characters that eventually found their way into the actual game. The star of the then unnamed game was an orange, armless character originally named "Hubert" before Gottlieb employees combined the working title of the game ("Cubes") with Hubert and ended up with Cubert, which eventually became Q*bert.

The object of Q*bert is simple. Players must help Q*bert change the top color of each spot on the playfield by hopping from cube to cube. Levels are completed by changing the top of each cube to a predetermined color. In early levels, cubes change to the correct color when they are hopped on; in later levels, cubes need to be hopped on multiple times, and can even be changed back to their original color. Amidst all of this hopping, Q*bert must avoid touching other characters such as Slick, Sam, and Coily the Snake. Q*bert has no offensive weapons; he cannot shoot (originally, Lee had planned to call the game "Snots and Boogers" and wanted to give

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Q*bert the ability to shoot). Instead, Q*bert must survive by evading his enemies' touch, either by hopping away or temporarily escaping using one of the limited flying discs available on each level.

A few things stand out about the arcade version of Q*bert. The first is the machine's joystick: it's a standard four-way joystick, but rotated 45 degrees so that the stick's movements correspond with Q*bert's diagonal leaps. Second is the game's speech synthesis: whenever Q*bert is touched by one of his enemies, he emits a random string of humorous speech-like sounds. Lastly, Gottlieb (being the pinball wizards they were) included a pinball "knocker" that would rap the inside of cabinet whenever Q*bert fell off of the pyramid.

Parker Brothers took on the challenge of porting Q*bert to several home console gaming systems, including the Atari 2600, the Atari 5200, Intellivision, ColecoVision, and home computer systems such as the TI-99/4a, the VIC-20 and the Commodore 64 (many other non-official ports and clones were also released). In honor of the 30th anniversary of the Intellivision, that is that version I am reviewing today.

Graphically, Parker Brothers had major hurdles to overcome when bringing Q*bert into people's homes. The relatively low resolution of home video game consoles did not lend themselves to drawing smooth diagonal lines. This made drawing Gottlieb's Escher-inspired cube pyramid a nightmare. Compared to the Atari 2600 version (which looks like a bloated, pixelated mess), the Intellivision release looks amazingly good. One thing veteran Q*bert players will notice is that the game board contains a pyramid of only six rows of cubes, compared to the arcade's seven rows. (The Atari 2600, Intellivision, Sega Master System and VIC-20 all contain only six rows of cubes; more powerful systems such as the ColecoVision, Atari 5200 and the Commodore 64 managed to squeeze all seven rows on screen.) Even though the playfield is slightly smaller than the arcade version, game play remains essentially the same.

Q*bert makes good use of the Intellivision's processing power. While the cubes are obviously well defined and similar in color, so are Q*bert and his foes. Q*bert, Coily, Ugg, and the entire gang all make appearances here and all of them resemble their arcade counterparts. Also true to the source, the flying discs surrounding the pyramid appear in four colors. The Intellivision port of Q*bert also delivers impressive audio, with authentic music, sound effects, and even Q*bert's unintelligible cursing. Details such as these really help the Intellivision port of Q*bert stand out.

When it comes to controls, Parker Brothers faced a tough decision when it came to porting Q*bert to home consoles: they could either have players to rotate their joystick an unnatural 45 degrees to replicate the rotation of the arcade stick, or force players to use diagonal joystick presses. Ultimately, Parker Brothers used both methods. While Atari 2600 owners were instructed to hold their sticks diagonally, the Intellivision version allows players to simply press diagonally on the controller's directional disc. Finding that exact diagonal point is not always easy to do, especially in a game where quick jumps are required. Unfortunately, those who already find the Intellivision controller awk-

ward may find controlling Q*bert almost impossible. While the game is certainly playable, its controls do take some getting used to.

Wonky control issues aside, Parker Brothers' port of Q*bert for the Intellivision surpasses the Atari 2600 and Odyssey 2 versions, but falls short of the Colecovision, NES, and TI 99/4a versions. Due to licensing issues Q*bert didn't make it to either of the modern Intellivision compilation packages (Intellivision Lives and Intellivision Rocks), so to play the Intellivision version you'll need either an Intellivision or an Intellivision emulator. Graphically updated versions of the original appeared on multiple consoles throughout the years including the PlayStation and Dreamcast. The original arcade version is available for download on the PS3 via the PlayStation Network.

