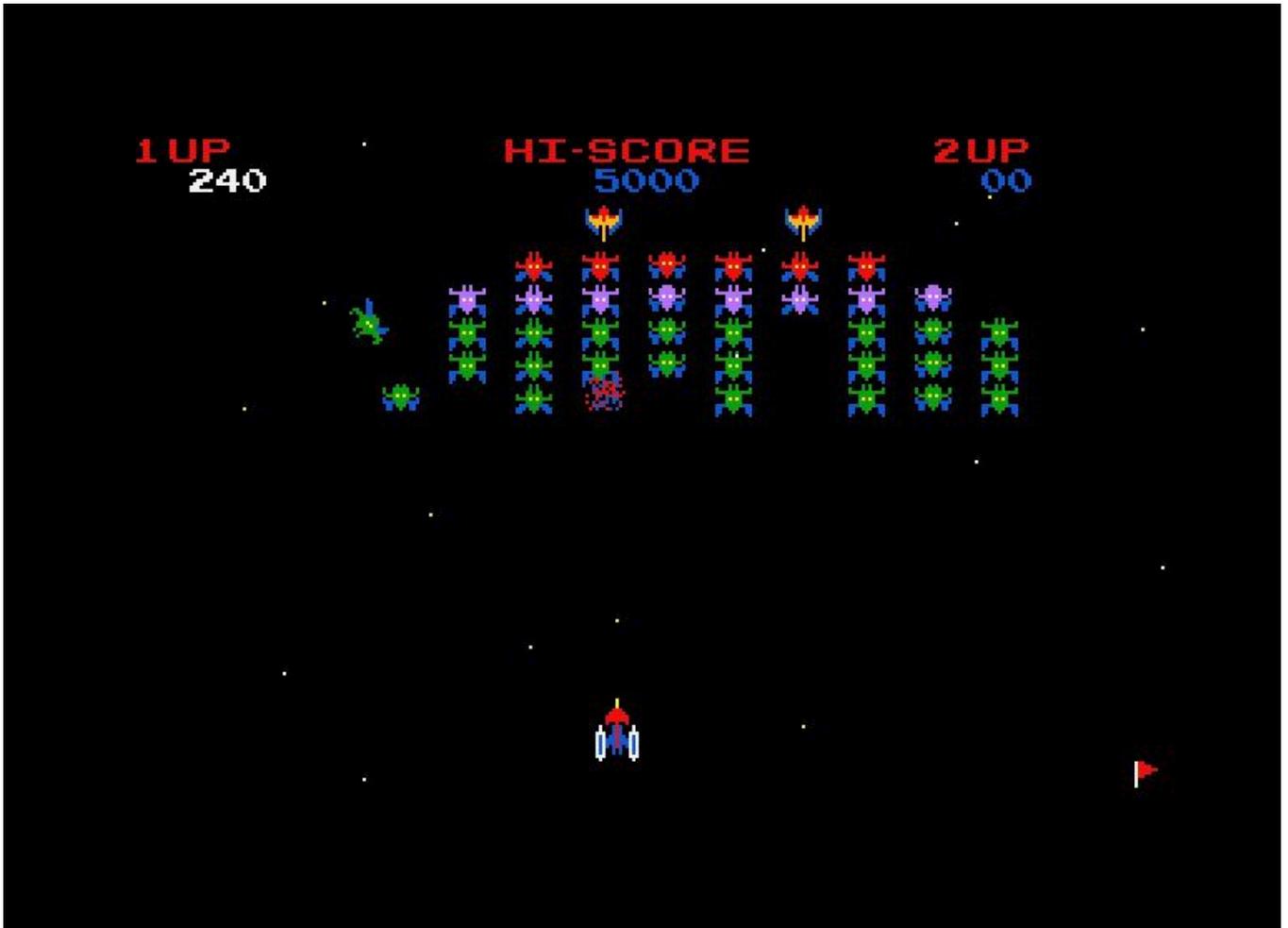


A secret slice of loading screen history

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Colin Campbell

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What do you do during loading screen-time? Gaze at the screen in a stupefied torpor? Check your other screens in the vain hope of finding something of interest for a few seconds? Make a cup of tea?

Many games seek to keep your attention on the game. They show in-world artifacts or offer up gameplay tips or clue the player into minor aspects of lore and narrative. Others, like the FIFA series, offer up practice sessions on key skills.

I hadn't really given the whole issue much thought. Loading screens, after all, do not take long these days. But I hadn't realized, until today, that a single game company owns the patent on one neat idea, which is the inclusion of a loading screen minigame that is not especially relevant to the main game at hand.

Over on Gamasutra, video game legal specialist David Hoppe tells an interesting story about how Namco nabbed a patent on loading screen minigames 20 years ago, a patent that is due to expire later this year.

"Namco holds a dubious patent on 'auxiliary games' that play while the main game loads," writes Hoppe. "Namco's patent, U.S. Patent 5,718,632, was filed in 1995 and is thus set to expire in 2015."

It's all about Galaxian

When Namco developed arcade racing game [Ridge Racer](#) for the PlayStation system back in 1994, the company became frustrated by the long load times on the new CD-ROM technology.

In a 2012 [NowGamer](#) interview, Ridge Racer team member Yozo Sakagami recalls that the company decided to include a minigame of arcade classic Galaxian. "We were thinking 'Somehow we've got to make this waiting time more enjoyable,'" he said. "Because I was on the team that made the Galaxian arcade, I determined to include this excellent creation in honor of my old boss."

It was a neat way for Namco to remind players of its heritage. Galaxian is a very fine game, after all. But then the company applied for (and was granted) a patent for loading screen minigames that are not associated with the main game being played.

Hoppe points out that certain minor games have breached the patent, without Namco (or its successor Bandai Namco) appearing to take action. He argues that it was likely better for Namco to ignore these breaches, rather than risk litigation that might have ended up invalidating its patent.

He says that the patent probably ought not have been allowed in the first place. "Patents exist to incentivize innovation and progress. The general requirements for patentability are that the subject matter be patentable, and that the invention is useful, novel and non-obvious. Certainly an auxiliary game is useful for passing the time while the main game loads. However, the patent would seem to fail on the later two points, since interactive loading screens had already been in use prior to Namco's patent."

Once the patent expires, developers will be allowed to create goofy minigames in loading screens to their heart's content. Whether they will or not remains to be seen, but we are left wondering about the "what-ifs" of the past 20 years, if this practise had been allowed to flourish freely, as it ought to have been.

Polygon has sent a request for comment to Bandai Namco.