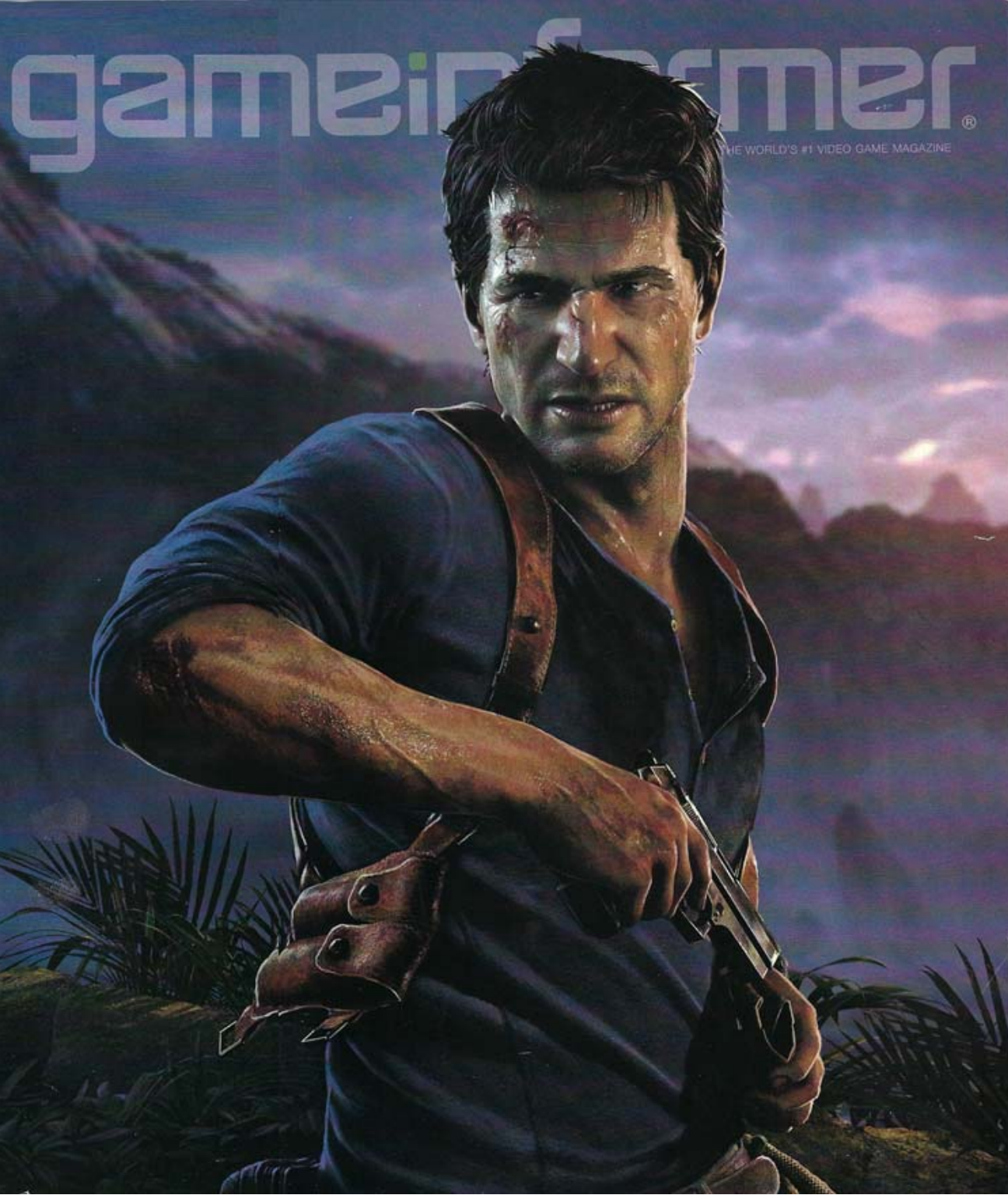
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A Tribute To Ralph Baer,

The Father Of Video Games

by Leonard Herman, Video Game Historian

During the Passover holiday, Jews around the world sing a song "Dayenu," which translates roughly to "that would have been enough for us," that celebrates the numerous gifts that God gave the ancient Jews during their exodus from Egypt. But if he only gave them one gift, it would have been enough. That word best summarizes Ralph H. Baer's achievements. If all Baer had done was invent the home video game console...*dayenu*.

The analogy is apt because Baer, who died at the age of 92 on December 6, 2014, did much more than invent the video game. He was an engineer who looked at things with a visionary's eyes and conceived ways to improve them. Take Touch Me, a non-video arcade game from Atari that Baer spotted at an arcade trade show in 1974. The machine had four buttons and four corresponding lights that randomly blinked. The player had to press the buttons in the order that the lights blinked. Baer felt that the game would have potential if four different tones sounded along each light. Thus, Simon was born in 1978 and went on to become one of the most popular electronic toys of all time.

Baer's inventions ran the gamut from a high-voltage insulation tester for Navy aircraft and LCD panels for helicopters to consumer products such as talking doormats and musical greeting cards. Sometimes, to his dismay, a finished product didn't turn out the way he wanted. In 2000, Baer conceived a line of "talking tools" that were supposed to teach children how to use them. The Talking Tape Measure, for example, verbalized the distance that the tape was measuring. Hasbro licensed the line and released them as toy tools that spoke ("I'm a hammer!") but offered no educational value.

Baer continued to tinker long after he retired. But he was dismayed about how impersonal the industry had become. He disliked having to present products to 24-year-olds in suits who didn't do their homework and had no idea who he was. A cool and unique toy GPS system that he designed for kids was rejected because it didn't have a storyline to go with it.

Despite that, Baer was a humble man who had never desired to be a household name. He was of the old school that believed that the customer was king. In his world, Atari was his customer since it was a licensee of Magnavox. Therefore, if a particular customer – Atari's Nolan Bushnell – wanted to proclaim to the world that he invented video games, Baer quietly sat on the sidelines and let him, knowing that it was just part of doing business.

But one can only keep their modesty in for so long. When the former "customer" went out of his way not to credit Baer for his innovations, Baer began to get somewhat annoyed.

I first met Ralph Baer when he invited me to visit him in 1998. This began a fruitful friendship that I shared with both him and his dear wife, Dena, who died in 2006. By this time, his name was no longer in the news and his involvement in the development of the first video game was nearly forgotten. Upon learning that I was visiting Ralph, my editor at *Electronic Gaming Monthly*, then the world's premier game magazine, asked me to write an article about him. The trip actually formed the basis of two articles. "The Electric Gamemaker" was published in the May 1999 issue of *Games* and it focused on Ralph's non-videogame-related creations such as Simon and Computer Perfection. But it was the seven-page "The Baer Essentials," which was featured in the January 2000 edition of *EGM*, that really caught the attention of thousands of people in the industry who hadn't been aware of him and his achievements.

A few years after the piece was published, Ralph remarked to me that it had been one of the best articles ever written about him. And although I cannot say whether the article had anything to do with it or not, he also credited it to the new-found fame he began receiving after it was published. Soon he was making appearances at the American Computer & Robotics Museum in Bozeman, Montana, and the Computerspiele and Nixdorf Museums in Germany, a country that he swore he would never return to after being persecuted by the Nazis in the '30s. But he did return and was treated like royalty. And he was treated the same way in the United States when the Smithsonian accepted most of his copious notes along with the original "Brown Box," the prototype for the Magnavox Odyssey. So popular was the Brown Box, that Ralph made two dozen replicas so other museums around the world could have them on display.

And then the accolades followed. He was inducted into the United State's Patent and Trademark Inventors Hall of Fame. He received a multitude of awards including the IEEE's Ibuka Masura Consumer Electronics Award for contributions to consumer electronics technology and the Edison Awards that honor innovation, and excellence in the development, marketing, and launch of new products. But nothing could come close to the National Medal of Technology that he received from President George W. Bush at a White House ceremony in February 2006. After that, there was no longer any doubt regarding Ralph Baer's many accomplishments.

In July 2015, the Smithsonian will unveil a special exhibit honoring inventors, and portions of Ralph's original lab will be on display along with his prized Brown Box. On my last visit with him in June 2014, Ralph told me that he hoped to see it. Unfortunately, two months later as he became sicker and more tired, he told me on the phone that he doubted if he would live long enough to see the exhibit. It pained me, because it was the first time I ever heard him being negative. But he was a realist. He was happiest when he was working on new projects and he was blessed with a mind that remained sharp until the end. I will miss him terribly.

Ralph Baer was my idol, my inspiration, my mentor, and my "surrogate" father. But even had he just been my friend...*dayenu*.

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Leonard Herman is a longtime video game journalist and the author of the video game history book Phoenix: The Fall & Rise of Videogames