

# INSERT COIN TO PLAY

## SPACE INVADERS AND THE 100-YEN MYTH

*A popular video arcade game has a numismatic backstory.*

**F**OR MORE THAN three decades, the public has been led to believe that one video arcade game’s popularity nearly crippled a nation’s coinage supply. As intriguing, amazing and unbelievable as this story might seem, the facts simply do not add up. In the end, the only defining word for this report is exactly that—unbelievable.

In the worlds of academia, journalism and pop culture, video game history is steadily becoming a popular topic of study and discussion. Although the subject has been addressed by a variety of trade publications over the years, the veracity of some of the information is dubious and has propagated misconceptions, myths and legends.

One of the most erroneous tales of early video game history is the frequently referenced “100-Yen Myth.” This theory posits that Taito Corporation’s “Space Invaders” game, first released in 1978, proved so popular that it drained Japan’s sup-



▲ **CONTRARY TO POPULAR BELIEF,** production of Japanese 100-yen coins did not increase markedly during the heyday of the Space Invaders video game in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

Actual Size: 22.6mm

ply of 100-yen coins. This apocryphal story has been told repeatedly for almost 30 years in a variety of publications and web-

sites, and even served as the premise of a documentary (*100 Yen: The Japanese Arcade Experience*, 2012).

What frustrates those writing the history of video games is that the definitive source of this myth is seldom cited. I intend to examine the supposed facts and uncover the truth behind the popular Space Invaders game and the alleged shortage of Japan’s 100-yen coins. Relying on research and a basic understanding of numismatics, I will prove the legend is nothing more than a fabrication.

### Alien Invasion

Who would have guessed that Tomohiro Nishikado’s video game, with its ever-approaching onslaught of ominous spacecraft and alien creatures, would become a cultural and highly addictive phenomenon? After the game gained ground in Japan’s nascent video arcade market, salons catering entirely to Space Invaders fanatics began popping up to quench the public’s insa-

PHOTOS: HERITAGE AUCTIONS

The year 1979 was marked by a 76.4-percent increase in the production of 100-yen coins, followed by a 64.9-percent rise in 1980.

**PRODUCTION OF JAPANESE 100 YEN**

1979-84

| YEAR | MINTAGE     |
|------|-------------|
| 1978 | 292,000,000 |
| 1979 | 382,000,000 |
| 1980 | 588,000,000 |
| 1981 | 348,000,000 |
| 1982 | 110,000,000 |
| 1983 | 50,000,000  |
| 1984 | 41,850,000  |

tiable thirst for the game.

Not long after, inaccurate stories about the game and its effect on the local money supply began to emerge. A large number of books, articles, websites and documentaries stated that the game's overwhelming popularity quickly created a shortage of 100-yen coinage that took Japan by surprise. In some cases, sources reported the public had no change to use in phone booths or the subway.

In the rare instances in which the source of this information is cited, the reference usually is Martin Amis' *Invasion of the Space Invaders: An Addict's Guide to Battle Tactics, Big Scores and the Best Machines* (1982), which has become the primary source of the game's early history. However, Amis was not the first to present this erroneous information; a 1980 article in *New Scientist* (published two years before Amis' work) asserted that the Japanese Mint had to triple its production of 100-yen coins to avoid an economic crisis. The statement was pure fiction.

Even recent publications, although comprehensive and well researched, have fallen prey to the urban legend surrounding

Space Invaders. Then, two years ago, innovative research came to light regarding how the game truly impacted Japanese coinage. The article, written by numismatist Mark Fox and published in the February 2012 edition of *World Coin News*, proposed that the shortage was a brief, isolated incident, dispelling the myth that the Japanese Mint began striking two to four times the annual number of 100-yen coins.

The mintage figures for 1979-84 support Fox's thesis. The year 1979 was marked by a 76.4-percent increase in the production of 100-yen coins, followed by a 64.9-percent rise in 1980. The increased quantities are

notable, but nowhere near the oft-repeated figures of 200 to 400 percent.

Fox suggested that the Japanese Mint increased production of the copper-nickel 100-yen coins in the late 1970s to counterbalance the hoarding and melting of the 60-percent-silver 100 yen struck in 1957-66. In 1983-84, mintages dropped substantially, which Fox attributed to the Japanese government's efforts to strengthen the value of the yen by limiting the number of 100-yen coins entering circulation.

**Birth of a Legend**

But how or where did the myth about the shortage of 100-yen

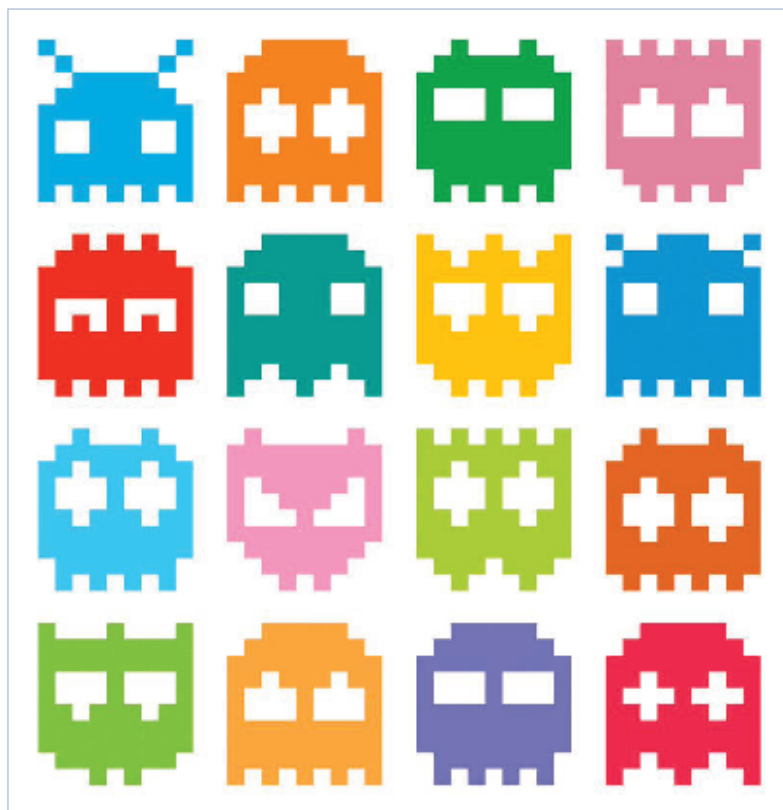


PHOTO: ISTOCKPHOTO/LAZYVECTORS

▲ **SPACE INVADERS**, developed by Tomohiro Nishikado and released in 1978, originally was manufactured and sold by Taito Corporation in Japan. Later, the popular video game was licensed for production in the United States by Midway, a division of Bally.

*It would have been impractical, and certainly not profitable, for Taito to allow massive quantities of coins to sit idle in collection boxes.*

ILLUSTRATION: ISTOCKPHOTO/JAMESBIN/LESLIE WIGINGTON



▲ **THE TAITO CORPORATION** may have taken advantage of the erroneous reports of coin shortages to promote *Space Invaders*.

coins originate? Seeking to validate the story, I contacted both the Japanese Mint and the Bank of Japan; neither offered any evidence that *Space Invaders* impacted the production of Japanese coinage.

In 1977 the first major crash in the video gaming industry resulted when companies were forced to sell their obsolete systems, thus overloading the market and driving prices down. Taito Corporation was uncertain if *Space Invaders* would prove successful. Given the tenuous market, it would have been impractical, and certainly not profitable, for Taito to allow massive quantities of coins to sit idle in collection boxes.

In his aforementioned arti-

cle, Mark Fox shared some observations from Chris Kohler, game/life editor for *wired.com*. Kohler believed newspapers merely reported on-the-spot coin shortages as opposed to increased coin production, and the myth was born.

In my opinion, overzealous marketers at Taito Corporation deliberately exaggerated the game's popularity in an effort to increase sales. Perhaps they took a cue from Atari, which was said to have promoted its "Pong" game by claiming the first cabinet installed at Andy Capp's Tavern in Sunnyvale, California, was so popular that the coin mechanism seized up and made the game inoperable. The bar's owner reportedly called Atari founder Nolan Bushnell and demanded that he fix the defective machine. However, at the opening of "The Art of Video Games" exhibition in 2012 at the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington, D.C., I asked Bushnell about the anecdote. He dismissed it as legend, noting that he was in Chicago at the time of the purported incident.

Regarding the myth surrounding *Space Invaders* and the 100-yen shortage, it appears the press simply misrepresented facts, and Taito Corporation did not dismiss the story. Only in recent years has Nishikado hinted it may have been a clever ploy. Nevertheless, the game stood the test of time, thriving in the golden age of arcade games and becoming an incredible financial success. ■

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PHOTO: CHARLES PARADIS

▲ **AT "THE ART OF VIDEO GAMES" EXHIBITION** at the Smithsonian Institution in 2012, the author (right) spoke with Atari founder Nolan Bushnell.