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## Videogame Theater

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Review by [Randy Miller III](#) | posted January 25, 2009 | [E-mail the Author](#) | [Start a Discussion](#)



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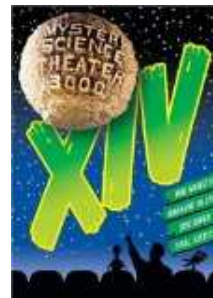
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Much to the delight (and dismay) of 1980s arcade enthusiasts, Scott Chernoff and Frank Meyer's *Videogame Theater* has exposed the seedy underworld populated by our favorite pixelated heroes. It's advertised as "the history of video games...as told by puppets", but that's only half the story: the other half is that they've battled drug addiction, alcohol dependency, taboo sexual urges and more. So think of it as *South Park* meets...well, whatever arcade you frequented when games were still a quarter. From Q-Bert to Donkey Kong, it would appear that no sacred cow is safe; armed with acclaimed puppeteer BJ Guyer (*Crank Yankers*, *Team America: World Police*) and almost no production budget, *Videogame Theater* promises big laughs and shocking surprises.

Undoubtedly, Pac-Man is the star of the show, as he appears on more than half of the included 4-6 minute shorts. Pilot episode "The Insatiable Hunger" details his fall from grace, as the pill-popping Pac-Man's personal life is in ruins; much to the dismay of Ms. Pac-Man and Junior, he's far from the charismatic superstar of the early 1980s. Every odd-numbered episode after that presents a "video blog" by Pac-Man: we see his wild mood swings, successes and failures from 1979 to the present day (seen above, he's wading through the late 1980s). These wouldn't be bad in a more condensed format...but as "breaks" that divide the self-contained episodes (complete with repetitive introductions, no less), they grow tiresome after awhile.

There are other stars on display, though *Videogame Theater* thoroughly destroys them in short order. Donkey Kong and Mario face off in the second episode, and it's hardly inspired: by now, we've seen the sordid world of Pac-Man, and there's little contrast provided in this installment. "Lara Croft: An Illicit Education" isn't exactly an inspired episode either, and the same can be said for "Joust: The Forbidden Fruit" (which involves human-on-ostrich action---in puppet form, of course---if that's your thing). "Frogger: The Terror Within" introduces a somewhat clever spin on why frogs cross the road, but it still doesn't fire on all cylinders. The last two odd-numbered episodes show a marked improvement: the short but sweet "Defenders of the Universe" offers a music-video inspired rap parody, while the double-length, cheesy epic "Q-Bert:

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Hello, My Name is Friend" includes a live-action appearance by Pitfall Harry.

On the whole, each episode isn't without a laugh or two, but the one-trick nature of these 14 adventures causes them to lose steam quickly. It's a bad sign when a 4-6 minute story runs out of ideas, but at least half of these episodes are guilty of such a crime. With such a deep well of characters and potential plots, it's sad when a creative team resorts to toilet humor at nearly every turn...especially when it's not clearly marked on the packaging, if you're thinking the little ones might enjoy this.

Presented by Uproar Entertainment, *Videogame Theater* arrives on DVD with little fanfare. This collection of episodes is certainly a mixed bag, but the relatively disappointing technical presentation doesn't help matters any---and though a few bonus features have been included, they're nothing to write home about. Ultimately, your interest in *Videogame Theater* will depend solely on your willingness to see sacred cows of the 1980s get flame-broiled and eaten. Let's take a closer look, shall we?

## Quality Control Department

### Video & Audio Quality

Presented in what would appear to be its original 1.33:1 aspect ratio, *Videogame Theater* looks wildly uneven from start to finish---but in all honesty, it never even approaches "above average". The color palette is typically dull, black levels are inconsistent and image detail is extremely soft. Digital problems are the real issue, though, with notable amounts of edge enhancement, pixellation and interlacing on display during many sequences. Overall, it's not a pretty picture in the least, which lowers the impact of this release a bit further.

The audio presentation, on the other hand, isn't quite as disappointing. Presented in what appears to be Dolby Digital 2.0, these episodes feature a fairly basic soundstage...but what's offered gets the job done. Dialogue and music are generally crisp and rarely fight for attention. Unfortunately, no optional subtitles or Closed Captions have been included.



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## Menu Design, Presentation & Packaging

Seen above, the colorful menu designs are basic and easy to navigate. The 78-minute collection of shorts has been divided into 14 chapters (one per episode), while no obvious layer change was detected during playback. Refreshingly enough, the main menu loads immediately, with no ads, previews or studio logos to slow things down. This one-disc release is housed in a standard black keepcase and includes no inserts of any kind. The cover artwork is cute...but it's certainly a bit misleading, considering the adult subject matter.

## Bonus Features

Not much to dig through here, though at least there's been some effort. The least essential is a brief German Interview (3:51) with Pac-Man and the creators, which isn't subtitled...and in some cases, the English dialogue is overlapped by German translation. Not sure if this is a joke or not, but it certainly isn't a valuable piece of production history.

Next up is "Meet the Puppets" (1:37) with co-creator Frank Meyer, who gives us a quick look at a few inanimate cast members. Also here is a more general Behind-the-Scenes Featurette (2:48), in which members of the creative team goof off while filming a few scenes. Closing things out is a more detailed Photo Slideshow (5:54) with plenty of production stills. All bonus features, like the episodes themselves, are presented in 1.33:1 and include no optional subtitles or captions.

## Final Thoughts

Though it has its moments, *Videogame Theater* rarely extends its scope beyond toilet humor and winking sarcasm. Even as a member of the target audience (read: a child of 80s arcade culture without an overly-sensitive moral barometer), roughly half of these episodes border on repetitive and annoying. The DVD presentation isn't impressive, either: boasting a lackluster technical presentation and plain-wrap bonus features, there isn't much here beyond the episodes themselves. Those familiar with *Videogame Theater* may find enough to warrant a purchase (especially at the low price point), but all other parties should try before they buy. **Rent It.**

---

*Randy Miller III is an affable office monkey based in Harrisburg, PA. He also does*



*freelance graphic design projects and works in a local gallery. When he's not doing that, he enjoys slacking off, second-guessing himself and writing things in third person.*

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