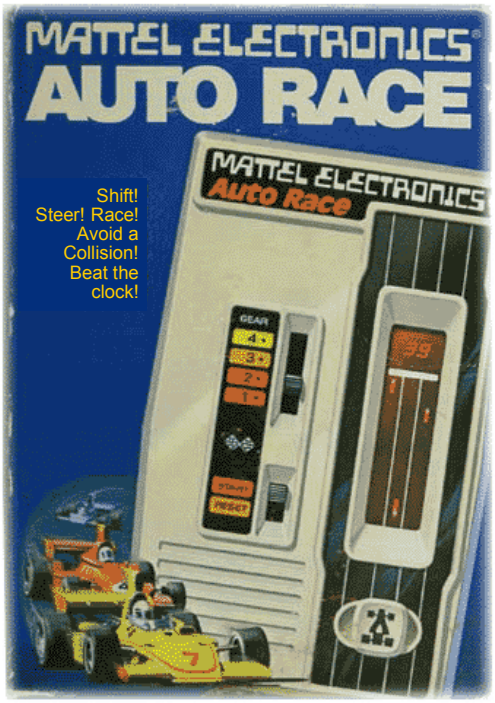


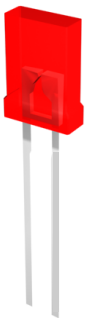
Towards late 1976, Atari released LeMans, Night Driver and Sprint 2 into arcades. But that mattered nothing when you're only just tall enough to reach a door handle and you've never even seen inside an arcade. American toy company, Mattel seized the moment and took advantage of the younger generation who had smaller hands and could barely see the monitor— never mind reach the wheel. With some not even slightly clever electronics, some savvy marketing and neat packaging, they released the first hand-held racing game.

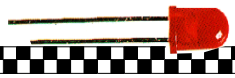
Other similar 'LED' hand-held games followed including Basketball and Missile Command.

LED POWER

Light Emitting Diodes were first used at home in the early seventies for calculator displays. Designers found much better use for them in game machines.

LCD technology was used in later years to light pre-defined pictures. Later still, LCD technology was used to create recognisable video imagery on machines such as Gameboy. Even later, we find both LED and LCD based television sets.





Playing Auto Race? Think it can't be good? Well if you remember it, you already know it's a great game. Yes, despite being no screen to speak of, it had them winning attributes that all decent games have. At it's simplest, it is a reaction test using LED lights to represent cars. The gears changed the speed of play, as you go on, your red LED makes his way toward the top of the three lanes, meaning faster reactions are necessary to avoid the red LED's raining down the three lanes. If you collide with a red, you are pushed down the lane until you move your self-centering lever to change lane...but this ruins your score.

At best, Auto Race was a brilliant entry to handheld racing, offering a fine balance between risk and reward. You see, the aim was to score as low as possible. The quicker you reach the top, the lower your score. The best way to play is to use fourth gear whilst you're at the bottom of the strip, then when you're in the middle, change down to third. Third is significantly slower than fourth and that allows you sufficient time to see the on-coming LED. Then when at the top again, back to top gear, as it's too fast to see anything anyway.

So Auto Race had all the elements of a good game. It even had a different engine 'whirr' for each gear and a crash 'beep'. The 1st gear sounds genuinely slow, the top gear sounding frantically fast. And the crash beep? It wasn't even one of those annoying beeps, just a nice subtle sound. Enough to alert you to your error.

It wasn't entirely perfect —the screen you play on is about 1 cm wide and the LED's are about 1mm long. Not for the visually challenged then.

You need to learn a method, you need fast reactions and you need a little luck. Add to this a short 'go' and quality audio, it made brilliant gaming with your similarly sized friends who also had no idea that in a few years, your entire television will be lit up with these things, not just a few LED.

Even at a tender age, from Auto Race we learnt that a good game does not need fancy graphics. But let's save that discussion for other folks and try to forget that we never really learned our lesson.

Scoring was done on an LED readout and you were ranked per the instruction manual (pictured below). To achieve under 30 seconds takes genius. 28 seconds is my time to beat. I thank you.

Under 30 seconds —— World Champion Driver
30-45 seconds —— Professional Driver
45-55 seconds —— Showing Potential
55-65 seconds —— Still an Amateur
65-75 seconds —— Stick To The Highways
75 or more seconds —— Leave Car In Garage