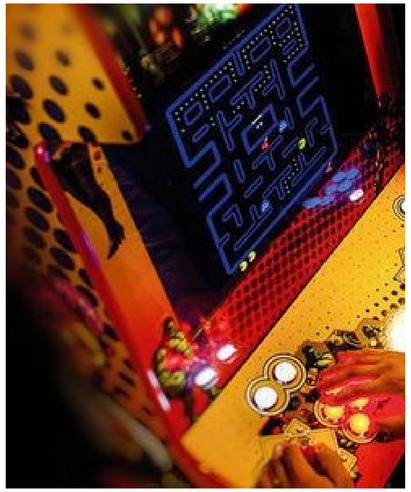
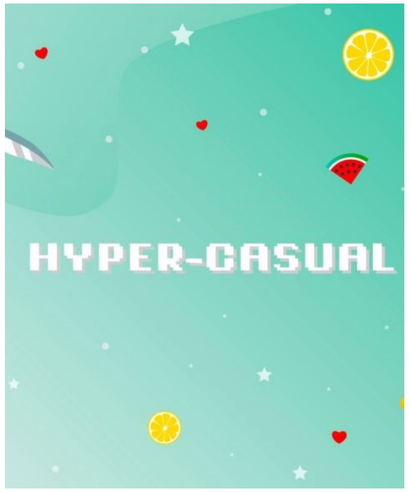
VISUAL LANGUAGE

GAME HISTORY

TODAY’S TOPICS

INTRODUCING ATARI | VIDEO GAME CRASH - PART 1 | ARCADE ERA | CASUAL GAMES





PART 1

HISTORY

ATARI AND THE ARCADE ERA

INTRODUCING ATARI

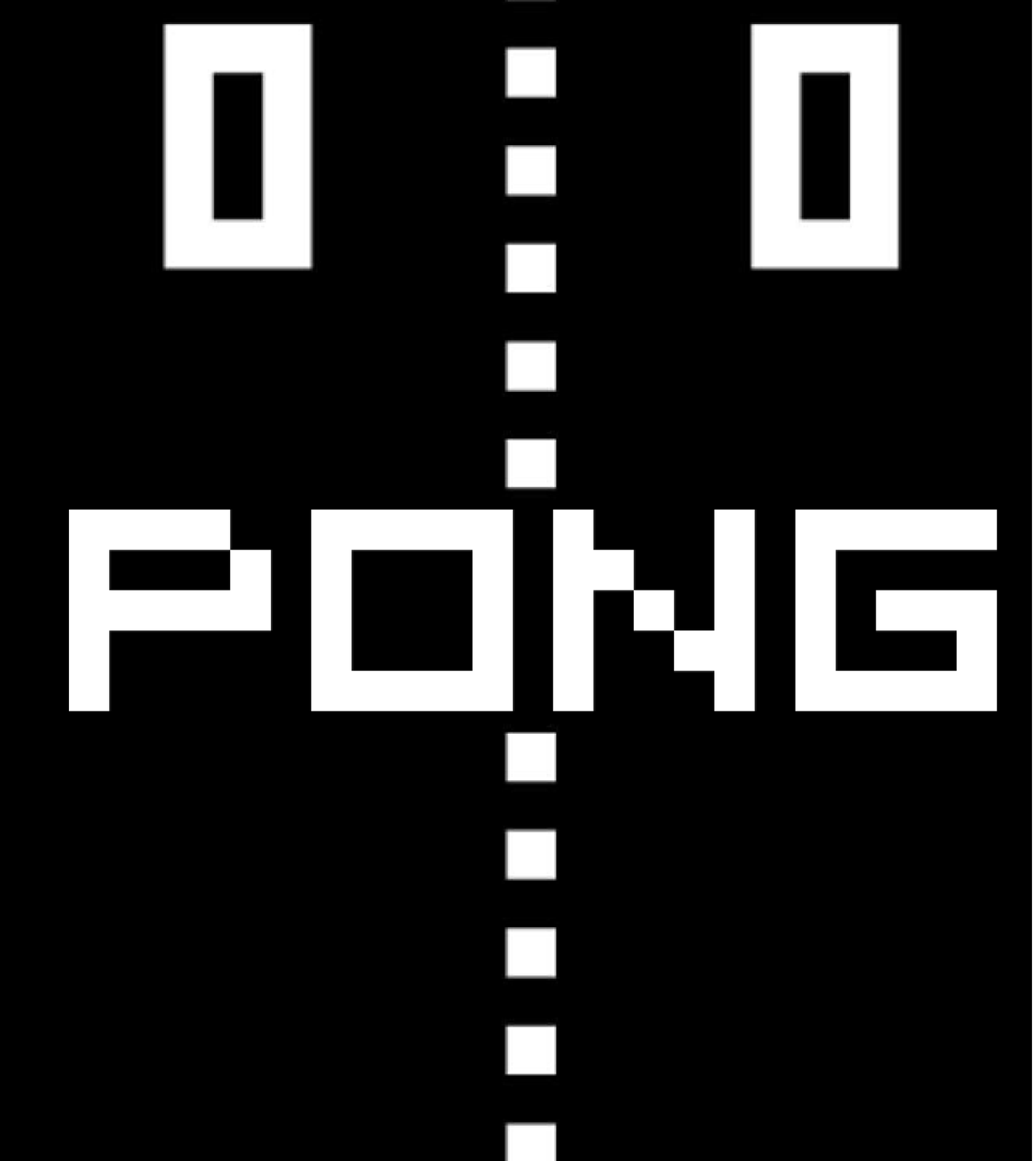
1972

A SMALL TEST

Shortly after the release of Computer Space in November 1971, Nolan Bushnell and Ted Dabney decided to form their own company and used a term from Go that is roughly equivalent to ‘check’ in chess: Atari.

One of Atari’s first employees was young engineer Al Alcorn. Alcorn’s first job, though he didn’t realize it, was more of a test. Bushnell described a simple ping-pong game with two bats, a ball and a score tracker. Alcorn started work on a prototype. Bushnell was inspired by the Magnavox Odyssey’s Tennis but thought of this more as a training exercise, believing the future of Atari lay in either selling a new variant of Computer Space or possibly a racing game.

Within three months Alcorn had completed the unnamed game. He had mounted a $75 black-and-white television in a four-foot-high cabinet and hardwired everything inside. Alcorn hadn’t been content to merely follow the basic outline provided and made several significant improvements to how the game played. As soon as Bushnell and Dabney played it, they knew the young engineer had produced something special.



PONG

The key to Alcorn's design, and what set it apart from the Magnavox Odyssey Tennis game, is that **the bat is invisibly divided into eight vertical segments**. Depending on which one of these the ball hits, the angle of return will be different, creating an effective illusion of racquet physics. He also made the ball accelerate after a certain number of returns, meaning that rallies between good players would quickly get intense.

Alcorn had also jury-rigged **a 'bloop' sound effect** when the ball was returned, and the overall impression the machine creates – particularly with regard to what had come before – is **minimalist sophistication**. Bushnell christened the game Pong and added an instruction card that continued this theme. Where Computer Space had created confusion with its complex rules, Pong relied on one sentence that even the most inebriated player could understand: Avoid Missing Ball for High Score.

Also, and so obvious it's easy to underestimate, Pong is a **two-player game that was placed in social settings**. Although the game could be played against a respectable 'AI' opponent, Pong was and is at its best with friends, the kind of thing that can break up an evening and spark minor rivalries among patrons.

PONG = PROFIT

The story goes that, when the prototype unit was installed in Andy Capp's Tavern in Sunnydale, California, Atari shortly received an angry phone call complaining that the machine had broken down. Such malfunctions were commonplace and, worried about some unforeseen problem, Alcorn was dispatched to investigate. The machine was working just fine; the bar's patrons had fed so many quarters into the coin slot that it simply couldn't take any more.

Atari sold Pong for $1,200 upfront cash, the production cost being $300–$400. The orders began rolling in, a dribble that rapidly turned into a flood as distributors and bar owners caught on to the fact that here was a bona-fide phenomenon. Pong was and remains one of the most profitable coin-operated machines in history – where an average machine might be lucky to pull in $50 a week, Pong would take four times that. By the end of 1973 Atari had sold 2,500 Pong machines. A year later it was more than 8,000. Pong was so successful that it even today it is often mistakenly cited as the first video game, by virtue of being the first to achieve mainstream prominence.

The rise of video games, and Atari, had begun.

CONSOLE TIME

Bushnell had also, somewhat inadvertently, pioneered a **business model that is still widespread in the industry today: copying another game.** Over the next few years the situation would reverse as **every amusement manufacturer scrambled to produce a Pong clone**. A small Japanese company, Taito, started making video games with Elepong, the first Japanese arcade game, and even Atari themselves produced several variants like Quadrapong.

Faced with a flood of copycats, Bushnell, now in sole charge after Dabney's departure in 1973, **felt that Atari could stay ahead of the pack by – ironically enough – focusing on original ideas**. In 1974 work had begun on **a home Pong console**. Although it was only an incremental improvement over the Magnavox Odyssey, and featured less variety, the simple name recognition factor of Pong saw greater success and – more importantly – awoke Bushnell to the potential of home gaming.

WHAT'S NEXT?

The success of Atari's home Pong machine again saw **a rush of imitators** – this time, thanks to the fact that the integrated circuit's design could be easily copied. Two years later there would be more than 60 'home Pong' consoles on the market, and well over ten million machines sold in the US.

But Atari was already thinking about what was next. The company's key players knew **that the future wasn't in the integrated circuit, but in the new technology of the microprocessor**. Where an integrated circuit could perform the single function for which it was programmed, a microprocessor was flexible – at the time, it was referred to as 'a computer on a chip'.

The importance of this for video games was obvious: you could sell a machine and then **sell individual game cartridges that contained memory chips. Plug and play.** The only problem was that, as Atari desperately sought the funding to bring the concept to market, **someone else had got there first**.

VES

In 1974, company Fairchild Semiconductor announced the impending release of the **Fairchild F8**, an 8-bit microprocessor that was at the bleeding edge of CPU technology and would soon become the bestselling computer chip in the world. The recent popularity of home video games led the company to try its hand at designing a console that could use this technology and take over the marketplace.

What was **paramount to the system was to have cartridges, and another unusual part of the design was the two controllers**: the main bulk was a large vertical hand grip, with a triangular eight-way joystick on top that could also be pushed down or pulled up as a fire button. The most visionary was a ‘hold’ button that allowed players, for the first time, to ‘pause’ the game (as well as change the speed).

Despite initial success the VES was **ultimately a failure for two reasons**. The first was that the games, even by the standards of the day, were nothing special. The second reason was that the VES had scared and awoken Atari.

VCS

The prototype known as ‘Stella’, named after an engineer’s bicycle, had been in development at Atari for years before the VES shocked the company out of its slumber. Bushnell instantly realized that the console would have to hit the market soon before a flood of competitors ruined Atari’s chances.

The Atari Video Computer System (VCS), named specifically to invite comparisons to the VES, was launched on 11 September 1977 at $199. The VCS came with two joysticks, two paddle controllers and a single cartridge: Combat. A multiplayer-only game, Combat was a top-down 2D shooter that offered twenty-seven different arenas and three different vehicles for players to blast each other with.

The VCS quickly sold more than any other console in history, 250,000 by the end of 1977. Fairchild’s VES simply couldn’t compete at this level and quickly withdrew from the market, leaving it entirely to Atari.

A NOT SO BRIGHT FUTURE

In the early 1980s **Atari was the king of an industry** it had created. There was no arguing with the sales of its VCS, and it seemed like the gravy train wasn't slowing down. But **the company's business practices were increasingly questionable and counterproductive** – for example, its refusal to credit designers led to disgruntled employees leaving to form their own companies (including Activision, now the world's largest third-party publisher). Atari also had several internal divisions that were competing with one another, and the **gradual loss of much of its talent was leading to a lack of quality control over software**. This hadn't affected sales – yet. But the company, and the industry, would soon be scrambling to survive.

CRASH COURSE TIME

‘Nolan Bushnell, often considered the Father of the Video Game Industry, saw the opportunity for the commercialization of video games. Bushnell founded Atari and oversaw the development of its first game - Pong. And then, through some questionably ethical business strategies, Bushnell was able to get his machines into arcades all across the United States. Atari also played a major role in getting video games into the home with the Atari 2600 console. Video games were becoming a part of peoples’ everyday lives and they were becoming a part of popular culture.’

ATARI AND THE BUSINESS OF VIDEO GAMES

VIDEO GAME CRASH – PART 1

1983

WILD WEST

If you were looking to buy a dedicated games console in 1982 you could take your pick from an abundance: the still-strong Atari VCS, the Atari 5200, the Bally Astrocade, the ColecoVision, the Coleco Gemini, the Emerson Arcadia 2001, the Fairchild Channel F II, the Intellivision and Intellivision II, the Magnavox Odyssey 2, various own-brand Sears systems, the Tandyvision, the VIC-20 and the Vectrex. And those are just the most popular…

The games available across these platforms varied wildly in quality, but an enormous amount of them were poor. This was mainly thanks to the ‘gold rush’ effect of Atari’s boom years, which meant that quality developers were ever more outnumbered by a boggy mix of amateurs, opportunists and optimists producing software. There were too many video games, and too many of them sucked.

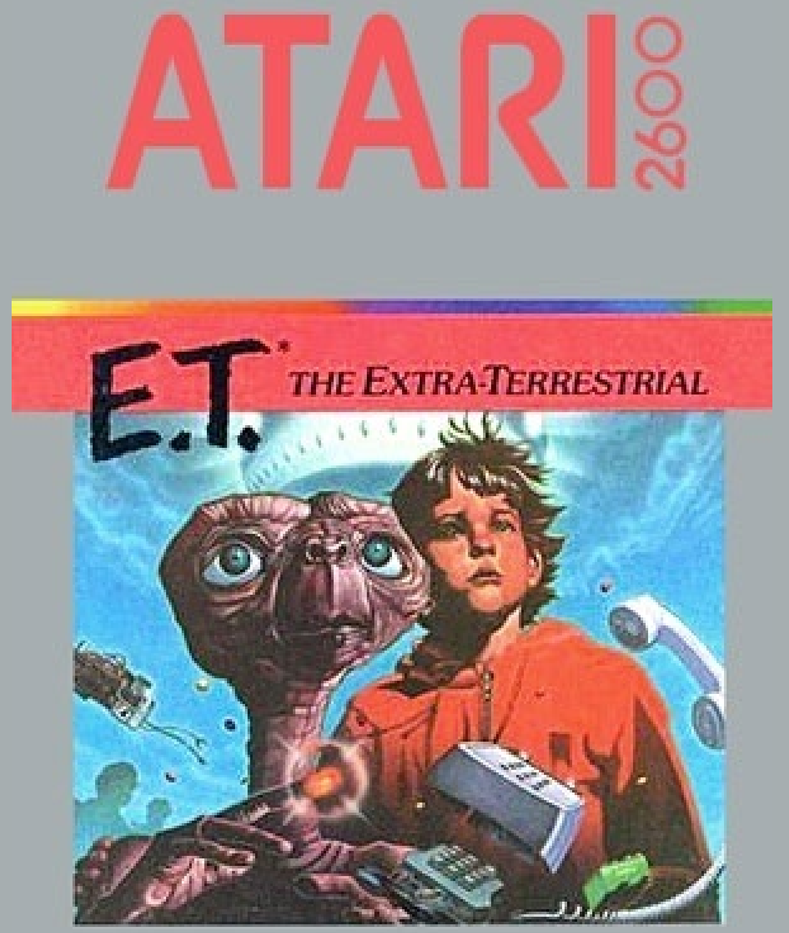
The release of the Commodore 64 in late 1982 also appealed to console owners – an affordable PC with internal chips specifically designed for use in games. By this point PCs were making existing consoles look like fossils and, as a bonus, PC games were easy to duplicate and much less expensive.

ATARI RUSH

Atari was being unsteadily piloted by Ray Kassar who, in a moment of madness that must have seemed like genius at the time, had licensed **Pac-Man for the VCS**. The game's development time was extremely short, in order to hit Christmas 1981, and the resulting product is appalling. Atari was so confident of success it manufactured an astonishing twelve million cartridges. At this stage the company hadn't sold twelve million 2600s to play them on…

Amazingly**, Atari would repeat this behaviour** at the end of the year. Atari bought the rights to Steven Spielberg's upcoming blockbuster E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial for a reported $20–$25 million. But the deal was done by the end of July 1982 and the game needed to be ready by September to be manufactured for Christmas.

E.T. is often described as 'the worst video game ever'. Needless to say, Atari manufactured around five million cartridges and got ready to ride the gravy train. Initially E.T. sold about 1.5 million units, but then sales flatlined, enraged customers started returning the game and retailers in turn began demanding refunds.



CRASH AND BURN

These games shouldn't be taken as the sole authors of the crash, but rather illustrations of the general state of the market at the time: consoles relied overly on arcade conversions which weren't very good, variants of successful games that had been around forever, and in technological terms simply weren't moving with the times.

On shop floors it was a bloodbath. The marketplace was oversaturated with poor-quality titles that weren't selling and ended up filling bargain bins for $5 (previous RRP $35). Shops tried to return unsold stock only to find many developers already bust, and in turn the only developers left were adapting by producing low-quality games they could sell for $5.

The crash was perceived at the time as heralding the end of US consumers' appetite for video games; certainly by toy retailers, who regarded video games as a fad and wouldn't stock them again for years. With hindsight this may have been a misreading: the crash shows that the audience was becoming increasing discerning about the quality of its entertainment, while simultaneously the industry was trying to serve swill.

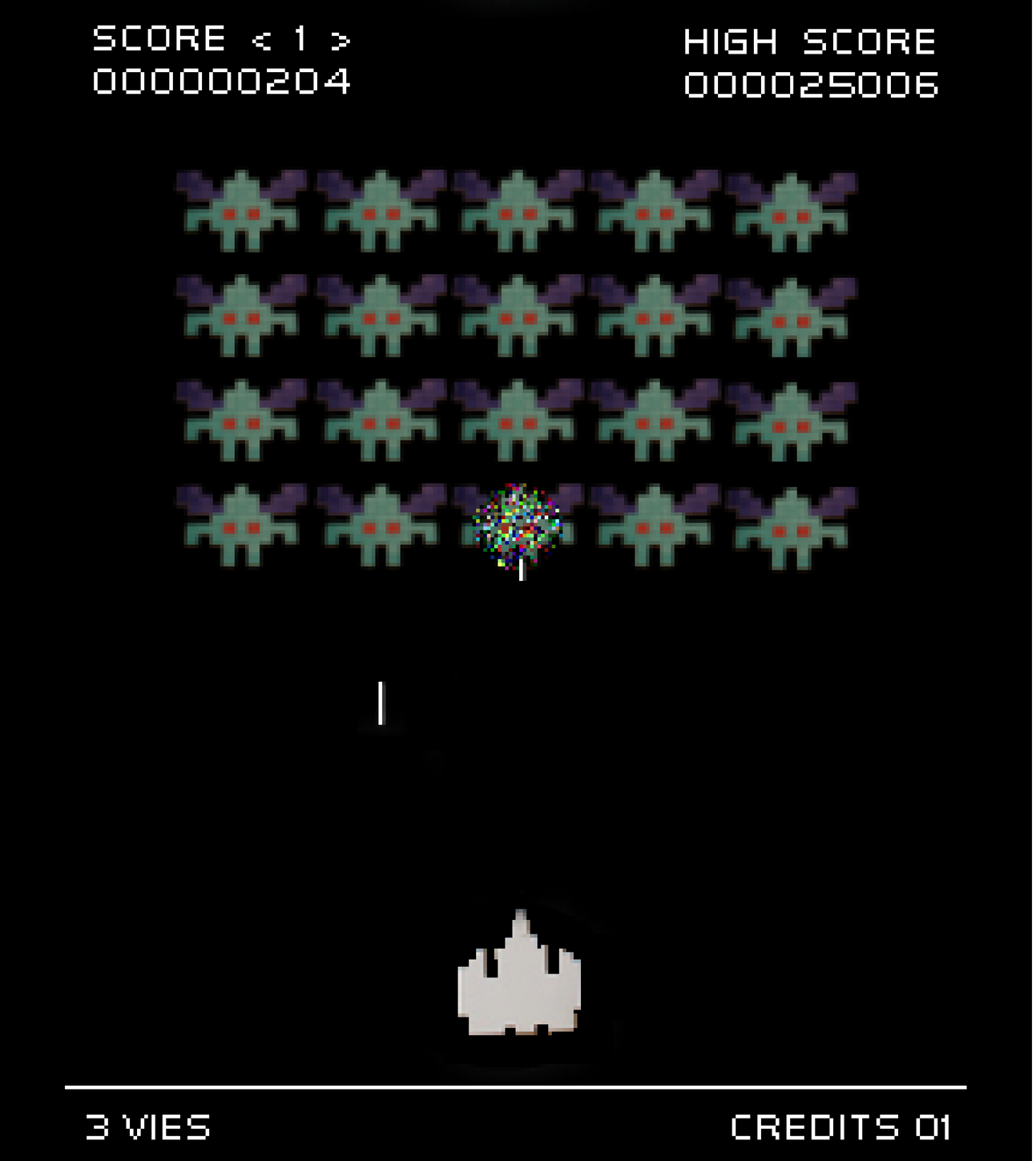
CRASH COURSE TIME

‘The 1980s was the golden age of arcade games. The video game industry was booming, but it had also become a sort of Wild West and everyone from Purina to Quaker wanted to get into the action. With these new creators came a glut of choices, and to remain competitive Atari began rushing games to market resulting in some truly terrible games. Gamers started to lose confidence in the industry and then in 1983 the gaming industry in the United States crashed.’

THE VIDEO GAME CRASH OF 1983

ARCADE ERA

1980



SPACE INVADERS

In the 1970s and throughout the 1980s arcade machines had a key advantage over home video games: these dedicated and expensive cabinets offered **visuals, sound effects and processing power far outstripping anything that could be bought in retail stores**. The pay-to-play nature of arcade games also resulted in particular design focus, that of giving the customer **value for money** while somehow also getting them off the machine as quickly as possible, resulting in many of the best and most **innovative games** of the time – often housed in custom cabinets to even further enhance the experience.

Opinions differ as to when the golden age of arcades began: the first bona-fide arcade phenomenon was Taito's **Space Invaders** (1978), which was so popular that following its Japanese release arcades dedicated to the game were opened. Space Invaders is in some respects the first modern video game – using the tools available to not only give feedback to the player but to act upon the player as well. You control a small ship, Earth's last line of defense, which can be moved horizontally across the bottom of the screen. Four barriers sit just above your firing position, which will stop incoming shots. Then there are the massed ranks of the invaders.

BATTLEZONE

Atari at this point were on something of a hot streak, and there's no better example than Battlezone (1980). This used **vector graphics**, which allow visuals to be created from simple and clean lines, rather than amassing blocky pixels. Like all techniques it has advantages and disadvantages, but it was perfect for Battlezone, which wowed players by creating a wireframe 3D landscape populated by marauding enemy tanks. It is difficult now to imagine just how much impact this visual style had: **in a world of 2D top-down experiences, Battlezone felt and looked like a 'world' to be explored**, filled with details like a background volcano, mountains and even the odd UFO.

Playing the game is an equally revolutionary moment. Where earlier attempts at 3D are rudimentary, Battlezone's **smooth motion** led to an amalgam of styles: strategically maneuvering your tank into the right position on an enemy, then firing the shell at just the right moment to catch them flush. The experience was so impressive that the **US military requested Atari produce a more 'realistic' version for their use.** The crossover of video games and military training would become something of a theme in the future, and it began here.

PAC-MAN

The rise of the arcade business meant that all sorts of companies were trying to break in. A former manufacturer of fairground rides in Japan, **Namco, introduced Pac-Man to the world**.

Pac-Man (1980) arrived on a scene dominated by shoot-'em-ups, and gobbled them up. Designer Toru Iwatani wanted to make a game that would appeal to women as much as men and settled on the concept of eating as equally appealing to both. The moment-to moment gameplay is eating dots spread around a maze, occasionally a piece of fruit, and the enemies were cute ghosts with bobbly eyes.

The game was **originally called Puck-Man** thanks to the main character resembling a hockey puck but, fearing that the machines would be vandalized to say something else, American distributor Midway changed the name.

In the two years following its release Namco sold 400,000 Pac- Man cabinets worldwide, making it **the highest-grossing arcade game in history**. The most successful American-made arcade game in history was Pac-Man's sequel, **Ms. Pac-Man**, a particularly impressive feat given it began life as an unauthorized modification.

DRAGON’S LAIR

These early arcade games, though far advanced when compared to home consoles, were still presenting players with relatively abstract visual language: Pac-Man, after all, is a yellow circle missing a segment. Dragon’s Lair (1983) was a jaw-dropper.

Don Bluth (a former Disney animator) and his team produced a branching cartoon starring the cowardly knight Dirk the Daring, which was then chopped up and, at certain moments, required a player to react quickly and correctly to an onscreen prompt to proceed. Get it right and the movie played on, get it wrong and Dirk died one of many beautifully animated deaths. The problem with this new laserdisc technology was that you couldn’t really make a decent game out of it – but in the context of other arcade machines of the time it looked like the future.

Dragon’s Lair was a total dog of a video game, but the visuals were enough to see it become a huge worldwide success – despite the high cost to play, arcade-goers simply couldn’t resist the alluring visuals. For a short time it seemed like laserdisc games might be the next arcade craze but as a series of problems surfaced, primarily the machines’ tendency to break down, it became clear they were a fad.

PART 2

KNOWLEDGE

CASUAL GAMES

CASUAL GAMES

In the mid 2000s, we saw a proliferation of Internet accessible devices and with them gaming would expand to a new audience. Social and mobile games, which together we'll call casual games sprang forth from this new development. These games spurred the industry to change its profit model, and by 2015, these casual games now make up nearly half of all video game industry revenue. And with their easier mechanics, lower price point, and social component these casual games helped integrate gaming into our daily lives like never before.

CASUAL GAMING


CASUALS
CASUALS EVERYWHERE
quickmeme.com


[redacted]
why is skyrim so addicting i've been playing for like 2 hours sdfkaj i need a life
why is skyrim so addicting i've been playing for like 2 hours sdfkaj i need a life
like 2 hours
SEE THOSE GUYS, CLARENCE?
CASUALS, ALL OF THEM.

ELEMENTS

The industry classification of “casual games” encompasses several genres. These very different games share some basic similarities:

- They have simple graphics and mechanics

- They are usually browser or app-based

- They are free or cost very little to play

- They are designed to be played in short bursts of five to ten minutes and then set aside.

As such, what makes a game “casual” is that it functions in the ambiguous time and space between the myriad tasks we do on digital devices; between work and domestic obligations; between solitary play and social gaming; and between attention and distraction.

CONTROVERSY

Despite their popularity and importance to the industry, these types of games are widely dismissed as culturally insignificant. Even the term “casual game” itself performs this distinction: designating, implicitly and by contrast, an aesthetic, narrative, and gameplay inferior to other types of video games.

This dismissive attitude partly comes from the kinds of feelings—shame, guilt, disgust, stress, boredom, etc.—that circulate around these types of games and their association with **work and procrastination.** Some of the earliest games for personal computers, for example, came with a “boss key” that, when activated, masked the current game on the screen behind fake spreadsheets designed to give the impression that work, rather then play, was being done on the computer.

A lot of casual gaming companies see their target **audience's unfamiliarity with the standards** of gaming as an invitation to abuse them by pumping out masses of shallow games lacking in replay value, or rip-offs of better games from the past loaded with cute window-dressing, in lieu of doing legitimate work that contributes real progress to the field of game design.

THE CASUAL GAME INDUSTRY RIGHT NOW

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