

History □

Genesis Alexey Pajitnov, in the spring of 1985, first programmed *Tetris* while working for the Soviet Academy of Sciences at their Computer Center in Moscow. Pajitnov, an enthusiast of puzzle games, shaped his favorite game, pentominoes into his programming. After long hours of working on the game (said by coworker Mikhail Kulagin to have "smoked an enormous amount of cigarettes"), Pajitnov's game of pentaminoes transformed into tetrominoes. Also different from pentaminoes, they now fell into a well, where a player would have to arrange in a specific way. This first version, which Pajitnov created using Pascal on the Electronica 60, consisted of brackets and of black and white graphics, with pieces made up of brackets. Pajitnov's friend Vadim Gerasimov would later port this to IBM PC. The game quickly made its way through the Computer Center. By the summer of 1985, Alexey distributed the first color version of *Tetris* to his friends outside the Computer Center. They distributed it to their friends, and soon later the game, Pajitnov would say, "Tetris, in two weeks, was in every single computer in Moscow." It further reached the outskirts of the Soviet Union and eventually throughout Europe. Because the idea of intellectual property rights did not exist in Soviet Russia, as anything Pajitnov had made belonged to the state, he did not receive even a bonus for his work.

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Into the West

Mirrorsoft first agreement

Robert Stein of Andromeda Software first encountered Tetris while at he Hungary Institute of Technology in 1986. Because they did not own the game, they referred him to the Soviet Academy of Science's Computer Center. The Computer Center, an organization made up of mathematicians, astronomers, physicists, and so on, had no prior initiative to market any game. The Computer Center sent Pajitnov to deal with Steins request. According to Pajitnov, Stein proposed "something like one hundred thousand pounds" in advance, to which Pajitnov replied the Computer Center was interested. This led Stein to believe that he had secured the rights to everything. Stein went to Mirrorsoft, a British-based company headed by Robert Maxwell, and representative Jim Mackonochie signed a deal to produce the game in the United Kingdom. Mirrorsoft enveloped the game in red packaging to draw on Russia's mystic, and various games under Mirrorsoft's license spelled "Tetris" either in a Cyrillic transliteration ("Тетрис") or in faux Cyrillic typography with Я representing R ("Tetrɿs"). Nearing launch, Mirrorsoft received a telex from Electronorgtechnica stating they were preparing to market the game illegally since Elorg did not give them permission. Elorg was a government department established to deal with foreign trade of software. When Stein met with Elorg on May tenth, 1988, he explained he did not even know they existed. He managed to clear a deal for rights to *Tetris* on the personal computer. In its first year, Mirrorsoft's version sold over 100,000 copies in America alone.

Mirrorsoft contacted Atari Games about making a video game console version. Representative Randy Broweleit, thinking Mirrosoft held the rights to the game, signed a contract. Atari tried improving the game's graphics, making the tetrominoes look three-dimensional. Henk Rogers, who travelled throughout the world looking for games to produce on the Japanese market, met Broweleit at an American trade show.

By October of 1988, Elorg had assigned Nikoli Belikov to examine their original agreement with Andromeda Software, who still have neglected its terms of payment. During this time, Nintendo was preparing to release its Game Boy and wanted to package *Tetris* along with it. Howard Lincoln, chairmen of Nintendo of America, showed Rogers a prototype of *Tetris* playing on the Game Boy.

Rogers went straight to who he believed to have the rights to *Tetris*, Robert Stein. According to Rogers, he believed they agreed on about 25,000 dollars, but after exchanging faxes for what he thought to be about three months, Stein continually saying he was going to Russia, Rogers became suspicious he was dealing with someone else. Andromeda sent telexes to Elorg proposing new licensing agreements, but Belikov replied that they must first honor the original agreement, then they could negotiate further. Running out of time, in February of 1989, Rogers took a plane to Moscow.

Renegotiating the rights

Happened as it was, Stein would meet with Elorg the same week as Rogers'. Without Stein's knowing, Mirrorsoft secretly sent Kevin Maxwell to meet with Elorg the same day Stein was sent to meet. Henk Rogers had no meeting, though he went in feeling confident, as he had prior experience dealing with other cultures. He found the people unfriendly and the help desk at the hotel he was staying at, Intourist Hotel, could not help him locate Elorg. The next day, February twenty-first of 1989, Rogers hired an interpreter, who helped him find Elorg. Although against Russia's policy, Rogers met with Elorg's Belikov off-hand. Rogers told Belikov that he was selling *Tetris* very successfully in Japan, to which Belikov replied that Elorg has yet to give video game console rights to anyone. The rights had only been given to Andromeda Software, and only for personal computers. After realizing this, Rogers explained his connection with Nintendo, which at the time possessed seventy percent of the world's gaming market at the time. Since Stein and Maxwell were coming, Belikov arranged for Rogers to meet with him the next day. He also arranged to meet with Stein the next day, and then saw Mirrosoft's Kevin Maxwell.

Belikov confronted Maxwell with Roger's Famicon cartridge, to which Maxwell said it was a pirated version. He said Mirrorsoft did not have the rights to console versions,



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That night, Rogers befriended Pajitnov and started discussing the future of *Tetris*. The next morning, Belikov added a clause to Stein's contract, which specifically excluded console rights. To distract Stein from the new clause, Belikov increased expenses as a penalty for missed payments, which he was ready to lower. Stein, so focused on just getting the rights, neglected to see the new clause.

Belikov next met with Rogers about handheld rights. Rogers presented himself as an honest, reliable businessman, contrasting to Stein. Pajitnov supported him, preferring Rogers because he saw Maxwell as someone who looked down upon everyone. After signing the deal for handheld rights, Elorg proposed Rogers to make them an offer for the still untapped console rights.

Legal battle

Atari, with their unknowingly faulty agreement with Mirrosoft, built 500,000 *Tetris* games, a huge investment for their first day launch, most of which went to advertisement, even taking a full page ad in *USA Today*. Howard Lincoln of NOA, after finding Elorg wanted to make a deal for console rights, secretly without telling all but one NOA employee (told them they were going to Japan) left for Russia with president of NOA, Minoru Arakawa. They signed a deal for 500,000 in guaranteed royalties as well as fifty cents on every cartridge. This was Nintendo's chance to harm their competitor, Atari. Meanwhile, by the twenty-third of March in 1989, Keven Maxwell, son of Robert Maxwell (who had ties in the Russian government), was sending threatening telexes to Belikov, which could have made a difference if not for Russia being on the horizon of political change.

Nintendo immediately sent a cease and desist letter to Atari advising them to stop any marketing or production of *Tetris* because they had sole rights to the game. Atari's legal consultants assured them that they in fact doubtlessly had sole rights, so they sued Nintendo in return. Nintendo provided Belikov as their key witness. The court date was set for November thirteenth, 1989. Before this, the state committee for computer technology told Belikov that if he lost the lawsuit, a special commission would be created that would look into how much money he had lost the soviet state. He joined Rogers in San Fransisco where they waited to testify. The judge spared them the witness stand and granted all video game rights to Nintendo.

Atari's hundred thousand cartridges were now worthless. To date, Nintendo dealers across the world have sold eight million copies of their NES version of *Tetris*. On November fifth, 1989, Robert Maxwell disappeared, leaving Mirrorsoft near bankrupt, and Atari still hurting.

Tetris accounted largely for the Game Boy's success, but Pajitnov had yet to receive anything for his game. He was still working for the Computer Center. After his game's huge success, he lost interest in scientific programming, and with the help of Henk Rogers, he and his family moved to Seattle. He established a company to develop games, and in 1996 gave up working for himself and joined Microsoft to make games. That same year, the original set of *Tetris* rights expired, and he started receiving royalties for the TETRIS trademark through The Tetris Company. He regularly returns to Moscow and thinks of one day returning to live there.

References

- Sheff, David (1993). *Game Over*, New York: Random House. ISBN 0966961706
- *Tetris: From Russia with Love*. Magnus Temple. BBC Four. Feb. 2004.

External links

- Vadim Gerasimov's *Tetris Story*
- *Tetris: a history* (Apparently drawing largely from *Game Over*)
- Wikipedia's Tetris article
- h2g2's Tetris article
- original NY Times article about Tetris (published 1988)

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