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Al Alcorn Interview

The creator of Pong on the birth of Atari, holographic gaming and being paid to not show up to work.

by Cam Shea

March 10, 2008

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IGN AU: So **Pong** was a huge hit and so was the VCS, but I'm actually really curious about a product that never saw the light of day – **the Cosmos**. Setting the scene - the VCS is out and a massive hit, Warner have bought the company...

Al Alcorn: All creativity had ceased!

IGN AU: You're heading up R&D...

Al Alcorn: No, no, no! I was off on the side. See, by the time Warner bought us I was part of the management team at mahogany row, and they had different people running consumer, they had different people running coin-op and manufacturing, and I was more elevated in an executive role. Well, when Ray Kassar came in with his team of East Coast, effete intellectual people that knew what they were doing and we didn't, I was not part of that at all, so I either had to quit like Nolan and Joe or go back into engineering, back to my roots and do something, and I felt very affected for Atari, it was my baby, so I put a team together and came up with the idea of Cosmos, a holographic game.

Why that? I'll tell you why. At Atari in the early days we couldn't keep a secret – Nolan blabbed, we all

talked, so we put out disinformation. And one of those [pieces of] disinformation was - we're going to do a holographic game! Well, here we are making a billion dollars at the company, and I figure holography would be fun. I mean, a lot of what I did was motivated by 'wouldn't that be cool?' Like the consumer thing [- the Atari VCS]. To make a chip, I mean, this was back when you didn't make a chip. Semi-conductor companies made chips. Customers didn't make chips, but we did that because 'hey, that'd be cool, how hard can it be?' Worst you can do you can fuck it up.

So... the holography, we'd been talking about it. It was absolutely the wrong way to do something, to start with the technology and then see if we can make a game out of it, which was what we did. The problem was, at that time all holograms were original images made with a laser on film and developed, and there was no way to mass produce them. And we actually had to solve that problem. We actually created the first embossed holograms, which you [now] see on Mastercard. The business model was - the VCS is great, but let's make a product like the VCS, a cartridge game system that's half the cost of the VCS. The problem is a VCS cartridge has one chip in it, so how do you reduce the cost of that? No chips.

IGN AU: They were Mylar or something right?

Al Alcorn: Yeah, it was a piece of metallised Mylar and it was a plastic insert, and there was actually two images on the hologram, and the base was a box with an LED array - an eight by eight array of LEDs so you could play Space Invaders, stuff like that. And when you put the cartridge in, there were little tabs built into the cartridge that told the base unit what game it was. All the games were stored in the base unit. There were two light bulbs that would read out different images, so you'd see a space invader moonscape scene when you play, and if you crash the lightbulb would change and you'd see an explosion in 3D. So that was the idea of it.



Superb LED game play and innovative ear-tingling sounds!

IGN AU: Okay, beginning to get my head around it. The whole thing sounds really kinda wild...

Al Alcorn: Yeah! But here's the problem. I'm going to build this thing and marketing says 'well, you gotta have a business plan.' I said 'why do we need a business plan? We never had a business plan before and it seemed to work.' So I did a business plan. It didn't make enough money the first year. 'Well that won't work.' So I said okay, so I gave them business plan X. It lost money for two years. 'That's a crazy idea.' So I go over

to the guy's phone in his office – the effete VP of marketing – and I call up manufacturing and I say 'shut the production line down for the Atari VCS.' Why? 'Because he doesn't want to build it.' That project X was the actual numbers for the Atari VCS! He said 'okay, okay.' Then manufacturing said 'we're too busy building the VCS to build this thing'... so then I found another guy outside who could do it better and cheaper. 'Okay, we'll build it.'

Finally in the end Ray Kassar said 'we're not going to build it'... here's the thing that I perceived happened. Isn't it interesting, when we were young at Atari, every year we risked the whole company on new products. If the VCS had failed, or Home Pong had burned up, we'd have killed the company. And now Atari is making billions of dollars a year in revenue and if this product had failed it wouldn't have been a pimple on the butt of the thing, yet the fear of failure and the ego of these guys – cos they weren't Silicon Valley, they weren't start-up guys, they were not risk takers - so nothing came out! And so I figured, what the hell do you need me? I'm just running around in circles here! So I said 'I'm going,' [they said] 'oh thank you!' They were happy to have me go. They paid me for two years not to show up. I had a company car not to show up in. A bonus for not showing up real well.

IGN AU: That's pretty bittersweet. I mean, this was your baby. And they really sat on their hands with the VCS. It was this incredible success, but...

AI Alcorn: In Silicon Valley, in the games business, as you know, in technology, if you don't obsolete yourself, somebody else will, right? If you sit on your butt – and these people from the East Coast, the old fashioned industries, [Kassar] was from the towel industry, and once you have a product like towels, they ran forever. And they didn't understand that you have to obsolete the product quickly, or somebody else will.

IGN AU: How do you feel about the Atari name being reborn in the modern era? On the one hand it has no relation to the original company, but on the other I guess it's a testament to how enduring and iconic it is.

AI Alcorn: Yeah. A story about that - the logo for the original thing was done by a guy, a local, Fred Opperman... we hired him as our graphic artist, so he actually did the look of all the videogames for the first three years, the coin-op cabinets. And when Warner Communications bought us in 1977, they said 'well, we're going to put up your image', so the first thing they did was do a survey to see what the impact of the Atari name and logo was, before they changed it, to get a reference. Turned out it had better brand recognition – this was in 1977 – than Mickey Mouse. It was like 'what?!' So we had paid \$3000 for the original logo from Fred and they spent \$100,000 to find out – don't fuck with it! [laughs] So really, it became an icon, a worldwide icon, so that's cool. To me, it's kind of sad to see some dear old friend get bought – like an old car you had and it gets bought by different people, and some people screw it up and some people don't, and it's like 'oh well,' it's still alive sort of, I mean, it's such an icon of American culture that you can't kill it.

IGN AU: Thanks AI!

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