

Proposal

Our group has chosen to study the Atari 2600 because of its foundational role in shaping the video game industry and revolutionizing American entertainment culture in the last 20th century. As the first widely successful home video game console, the Atari 2600 didn't just change how people played games, but it changed how they lived with technology. Its release in 1977 marked the beginning of home digital interactivity on a mass scale and laid the groundwork for today's global gaming industry. This project will explore the invention, antecedents, possible alternatives, and the Atari 2600's interaction with American society and culture. Through a documentary and an accompanying WordPress site, we aim to tell a cohesive and multidimensional story about a pivotal piece of consumer technology that transformed leisure, labor, advertising, and even family life in the U.S.

The Atari 2600, originally released as the Atari Video Computer System (VCS) in 1977, was not the first home video game console, but it was the first to achieve widespread success. Developed by Atari, Inc, the 2600 revolutionized the gaming industry by introducing interchangeable cartridges, allowing players to purchase and play multiple games on the same system.¹ This innovation distinguished it from earlier consoles like the Magnavox Odyssey, which had built-in games only and lacked the same level of versatility.²

The roots of the 2600 stretch back to the success of Pong (1972), Atari's first hit coin-operated arcade game.³ Pong's popularity demonstrated the commercial potential of interactive electronic entertainment and fueled Atari's decision to expand into the home market. To bring the VCS to life, Atari acquired the rights to cartridge technology from Fairchild

¹ Bill Loguidice and Matt Barton, *Vintage Game Consoles* (Boca Raton:Focal Press, 2014), 41.

² Michael Z. Newman, *Atari Age: The Emergence of Video Games in America* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017), 24-26

³ Steve Fulton, "The History of Atari: 1971-1977," *Game Developer*, November 9, 2023

Semiconductor, whose Channel F console was the first to use the format but failed to break through commercially.⁴ By pairing the cartridge system with a growing library of games and aggressive marketing, Atari was able to leap ahead to its rivals. Upon its release, the VCS retailed for \$199 and launched with a modest selection of titles, but its library quickly grew as Atari developed new games and licensed arcade hits for home play. The console became a phenomenon after the release of *Space Invaders* in 1980, which turned the Atari 2600 into a must-have household product.⁵ Its success positioned Atari not only as a technology company but as a cultural icon, bridging the gap between arcades and the living room. By the early 1980s, the 2600 had sold millions of units, firmly establishing video games as a central part of American leisure culture and setting the stage for the global gaming industry to follow.⁶

Prior to the creation of the Atari 2600 in 1977, or even the game *Pong* in 1972, the home video game industry had been started by Ralph Baer, who licensed his prototype to the company Magnavox, and the finished product called the Odyssey.⁷ Though the Odyssey was unique, the console lacked common elements that were important in video games today including color and sound. While testing the Odyssey around the country, a young engineer named Nolan Bushnell attended the demonstration at Burlingame, California in 1971, yet he was unimpressed with what he saw at the demonstration.⁸ Having developed a complex computer game called “Computer Space” earlier, Bushnell worked with Ted Dabney and Al Alcorn to create a simpler game that was inspired by the ping-pong game that he saw played on the Odyssey, eventually ending up

⁴ Benj Edwards, “The Untold Story of the Invention of the Game Cartridge,” *Fast Company*, January 22, 2015

⁵ W. Scott Goldie, *Modern Marvels: 70's Tech* (New York: A&E Television Networks, 2007)

⁶ James Fleury, “From Superman to Swordquest: Atari and Early Video Game Labor Exploitation,” *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 83, no. 5 (2024): 955-65

⁷ W. Scott Goldie, *Modern Marvels: 70's Tech*, *History Vault*, 2007, <https://watch.historyvault.com/shows/modern-marvels/season-13/episode-21>.

⁸ Goldie, *70's Tech*

with the game “Pong”.⁹ Pong’s impressive success after its launch in 1972 had set in motion the future king of the home video game industry, and the first collapse of the video game industry.

In order for Atari to build its home video console, it required a key invention that was developed back in 1971 by Intel, the 4004 microprocessor.¹⁰ For those who don’t know, a microprocessor, sometimes called a ‘chip’, is a sliver of silicon that contains microscopic transistors that read the binary language of computers.¹¹ Another key piece of technology was a method to have interchangeable games that would work with the console without damaging them, and that tech came from Fairchild and an already existing piece of tech. Inspired by the 8-Track tapes, another piece of 70’s tech, the physical game cartridge was sturdy enough to handle any possible physical punishment along with thousands of inserts and ejections from the console itself.¹² With a set of easy to handle game cartridges, a 6507 microprocessor, sound, and a 128-color palette, Atari’s new video computer system was set to take the nation by storm.¹³

The emergence of video game history and commercial availability in the United States began in the early 1970s, with the introduction of the first home console, the Magnavox Odyssey, and Atari’s first coin operated game, *Pong*, releasing in 1972.¹⁴ With 150,000 units sold, Atari began rolling out various coin-operated arcade games. In the second half of the decade, Atari introduced the Atari Video Computer system (VCS), later named the Atari 2600, a programmable console that used cartridges with their own chips so that a variety of games could

⁹ Steve Fulton, “The History of Atari: 1971-1977,” The History of Atari: 1971-1977, November 9, 2023, <https://www.gamedeveloper.com/business/the-history-of-atari-1971-1977>.

¹⁰ Benj Edwards, “The Untold Story of the Invention of the Game Cartridge - Fast Company,” Fast Company, January 22, 2015, <https://www.fastcompany.com/3040889/the-untold-story-of-the-invention-of-the-game-cartridge>.

¹¹ *Modern Marvels: 80’s Tech* (New York, NY: A & E Television Networks, 2006).

¹² Edwards

¹³ Bill Loguidice, *Vintage Game Consoles: An inside Look at Apple, Atari, Commodore, Nintendo, and the Greatest Gaming Platforms of All Time* (New York: Focal Press, 2017), 45.

¹⁴ Newman, Michael Z. *Atari Age : The Emergence of Video Games in America*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017, 2-3.

be played on the same device, increasing utility and expanding interest as a product.¹⁵ The video advertisement, “Have you played the Atari today?” skyrocketed the product’s success and meant that this now home video game system was a staple for families across the country.¹⁶ In less than a decade, the Atari company had propelled the launch of the video game industry, a new market that would change the world forever.

With the release of *Pong* in 1972, to no one’s surprise, many copycat games began being manufactured and sold as home TV games. Most were sports related, some could be used to play soccer or hockey in a similar formatting, maybe even in color, but the market for these coin-operated arcade games quickly became saturated. Comparable alternatives to the Atari 2600 were the Magnavox Odyssey, the first home console which was released the same year as *Pong*. Additionally, the Fairchild's Channel F and Mattel’s Intellivision rose as possible rivals to the product, with the latter being comparable to the Atari 2600 for its sophisticated graphics and unique controller.¹⁷ No matter the system, consumers were eager to get their hands on consoles that paired well with their home entertainment systems, meaning that Atari had to stay competitive in an already saturated market. *Space Invaders* was introduced first as an arcade game and then as a cartridge in 1980 for families to use in their Atari 2600 consoles. Once again demand was high, and *Space Invaders* was a success. Now owned by Warner Communications, Inc., Atari replicated this tactic with rollouts for *Asteroids*, *Missile Command*, and the ever so popular, *Pac-Man*.

WordPress will be used to house all of our project posts as we go through the semester. The home page is the main hub for all of our posts and the menu bar separates each major assignment into pages, meaning that every document will be easily accessible and be additional

¹⁵ Newman, 7.

¹⁶ Atari VCS/2600. ““Have You Played Atari Today” 1981 Ad – Space Invaders ‘Kids Always Win.’” *YouTube*, n.d.

¹⁷ Newman, 7.

housing for each post. AI usage will be limited, with the exception of early outlines for ideas and brainstorming general topics. Our documentary will include visuals and voice over by each group member. Digital tools and software being used to edit the documentary is not yet determined. We will source workspaces and equipment for recording through the DKC.

Our group chose the Atari 2600 to study for a contemporary view on technological advancement. It's a pivotal piece of tech history. Exploring this device means delving into the birth of cartridge-based video games and the impact this new wave of innovation had on American consumer culture.