

# ELECTRIC ESCAPE

## 30 Secrets of Atari

The real story of Asteroids, Pac-Man, Pong and Pole Position

By Steve Bloom, *Computer Games*, February 1984

Some of these aren't really secrets as as they are factoids. Nonetheless, they are fairly interesting pieces of trivia to read about. Where applicable, I have added comments elaborating on some of the information presented here.

--R.J.

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1. Nolan Bushnell, Atari's founding father, originally named the company Syzygy (the sun, moon and earth in total eclipse). He renamed it Atari because another company already owned the name Syzygy.
  2. Bushnell is generally believed to be the author of *Pong*, Atari's first game. Actually, Magnavox released the Odyssey 100, the first home video game system, which included a game remarkably similar to *Pong*, several months before *Pong's* debut in the arcades in 1972. The Odyssey 100 was invented by Ralph Baer.
  3. Bally/Midway rejected Bushnell's *Pong* when he demonstrated the game in its Chicago offices in 1972. Bushnell went back to California and started Atari.
  4. Given a choice between *Mappy* and *Pole Position*, two arcade creations by the Japanese firm Namco, Bally/Midway amazingly opted for *Mappy*. Atari had to settle for *Pole Position*, which went on to become the biggest game of 1983.

*Hey, Mappy was a neat game as well!*

5. *Gravitar* was one of Atari's worst selling arcade games. So they took the game program out of the cabinets and converted them all into *Black Widow*.
6. Mike Hally designed *Gravitar*. He recently redeemed himself as the project leader for Atari's spectacular *Star Wars* game.
7. Rick Mauer never programmed another game or Atari after he did *Space Invaders* for the VCS. He is said to have earned only \$11,000 for a cartridge that grossed more than \$100 million.
8. Todd Fry, on the other hand, has collected close to \$1 million in royalties for his widely criticized VCS *Pac-Man*.

*In contrast, it's been reported that Toru Iwatani, the Japanese programmer who created the original Pac-Man game, made only several hundred dollars -- the standard Namco salary at the time -- for his work.*

9. The man responsible for bringing *Pac-Man* to Atari -- Joe Robbins, former president of coin-op -- was severely reprimanded by the chairman of the board Ray Kassar for making the deal with Namco without consulting him. It seems Robbins was in Japan negotiating a legal matter with Namco at the time, and Namco apparently demanded that Atari buy the home rights to *Pac-Man* as part of the settlement. *Pac-Man* had yet to take off, but when it did, Robbins' gutsy decision paid off as *Pac-Man* went on to become the company's best-selling cartridge ever.

*Of course, the flooding of Pac-Man cartridges on the market was one of the primary causes for the video game crash of 1983...*

10. The man responsible for bringing *E.T.* to Atari? None other than Warner Communications' chairman Steve Ross. So convinced was he that *E.T.* possessed video game star quality, Ross paid Steven Spielberg an enormous sum (did I hear \$21 million?) for the rights to the little extraterrestrial bugger. Designer Howie Warshaw spun the game out in four months, only three million cartridges were sold and Atari soon began announcing million dollar losses. *E.T.* is now selling for as little as \$5 in some stores.

*Howard Warsaw finished E.T. very quickly because Atari management wanted it ready in time for the Christmas 1982 shopping season. Warsaw originally refused to do the project, realizing that a rushed product would make for a terrible game, but was browbeaten into it by his superiors.*

11. Warshaw also designed the *Raiders of the Lost Ark* cartridge and *Yar's Revenge*, which started out as a licensed version of the arcade game, *Star Castle*. "Yar" is "Ray" Kassar backwards.
12. One of Atari's most popular early arcade games was *Tank*, only it didn't say Atari anywhere on the cabinet or screen. Instead it said "Kee Games," which was another name for Atari from 1973-78. Atari and Kee (named after Joe Keenan, Bushnell's longtime partner) put out identical games in order to create more business for Atari. For instance, *Spike* (Kee) and *Rebound* (Atari) were volleyball games that came out a month apart in 1974.
13. *Tank* was designed by Steve Bristow, who is still with the company after all these years. Most recently, he has been in charge of Ataritel, Atari's telecommunications project which had been codenamed "Falcon."

*AtariTel was cancelled in July 1984, when the home computer/game console division of Atari Inc. was sold to Jack Tramiel.*

14. Code-names have always been popular at Atari. The VCS was "Stella," the 400 computer was "Candy," the 800 was "Coleen," the 5200 was "Pam." All were named after well-endowed female employees working at Atari (except for Stella, which was a bicycle trade name).
15. And then there was "Sylvia," the 5200 that never was. Pam, as everyone knows, was a stripped down 400 computer for the sole purpose of game playing. Sylvia was intended to be Atari's answer to Intellivision and was in the works long before Pam was born. But problems developed largely because the 5200 was projected to be compatible with VCS software, which limited the design of the new hardware. When push finally came to shove, Sylvia went out the window and Pam walked in the door.
16. Cosmos, Atari's experiment with holography, was a battery-operated game system that was introduced at a New York press conference in the spring of 1980. Created by Al Alcorn, Cosmos was never to be seen again.

*Cosmos was actually announced in 1981, at the Winter Consumer Electronics Show.*

17. Alcorn was the first engineer hired by Nolan Bushnell. His first project was *Pong*. His second project was *Space Race*, the forerunner to *Frogger*.
18. Another project announced was a remote-control VCS. Since it was wireless, you could play games at 30 feet without having to hassle with the console. It too mysteriously disappeared from Atari's catalogue.
19. Nobody in Atari coin-op liked *Dig Dug*, the company's first Japanese import, except for Brian McGhie, now with Starpath. It was McGhie who added the finishing touches to *Dig Dug*. His latest game is *Rabbit Transit*.
20. *Quantum* and *Food Fight* were not designed by Atari. They were the work of General Computer Corp. of Cambridge, Massachusetts. GCC broke into the business selling kits that would speed-up *Missile Command*. Atari sued and settled with GCC for the above-mentioned games.

*General Computer Corp. also designed the Vectrex, the only home video game console based on vector graphics.*

21. *Tempest* was originally intended to be a first person *Space Invaders*-type game. Then Dave Theurer came up with the idea for tubes on the screen. Theurer also designed *Missile Command*.
22. The first 200 *Asteroids* machines were actually *Lunar Landers*. Atari was so hot on *Asteroids* that it cut short the production run on *Lunar Lander* -- Atari's first vector game -- and released the 200 complete with *Lunar Lander* cabinet art.

23. *Asteroids* had two incarnations before it achieved its spectacular success. The first, *Planet Grab*, simply required you to claim planets by touching them with your spaceship. The second version, *Cosmos*, allowed you to blow up the planets and duel with another ship, *Space Wars*-style. Only in *Asteroids*, which came along two years later, did Atari engineer Lyle Rains introduce the concept of floating rocks.
24. Many at Atari, past and present, dispute Rains' claim that he was solely responsible for *Asteroids*. Ed Logg, who programmed it and who also had his hand in the design of *Centipede* and *Millipede*, is said to be the true mastermind behind *Asteroids*.

*Asteroids was developed by Lyle Rains, Ed Logg, and Howard Delman.*

25. One of Ed Logg's games that has never been released in the arcades is called *Maze Invaders*.
26. *Battlezone* programmer Ed Rotberg left Atari after he was forced to convert his favorite game to Army specifications. Dubbed the MK-60 by the Army, it included 30 game variations, improved steering and magnification, and simulations of Russian and American tanks. It sold for \$30,000.
27. Rotbert joined two other Atari engineers, Howard Delman and Roger Hector, and formed Videa, which not too long ago was bought by Nolan Bushnell for more than \$1 million and renamed Sente Technologies.

*After releasing a handful of arcade games, Sente Technologies was acquired by Bally/Midway. Today, the company is known as WMS, which stands for Williams/Midway/Sente.*

28. President of Apple Computers Steve Jobs began his hi-tech career at Atari. He was known to walk around barefoot, kick up his dirty feet on executives' desks, and talk continuously about going to India to meet a guru. Not only did he do the latter, he designed *Breakout* before leaving Atari for good.

*This story is **much** more intriguing than that. Bushnell assigned Steve Jobs to design the circuitry for Breakout, but it was too difficult for Jobs. He asked his friend (and Apple co-founder) Steve Wozniak to help, and promised to split the payment from Bushnell. Wozniak did it in four days and was paid \$350. But it turned out that Bushnell actually paid \$5,000 for Breakout -- Jobs pocketed the remaining \$4,650.*

*Ironically, Wozniak's design was so complex that no one at Atari could figure out how it worked. They had to redesign the entire game so it could be tested.*

29. Before they left Atari, designers Al Miller, David Crane, Larry Kaplan and Bob Whitehead were working on games that would later become Activision

cartridges. Crane's *Dragster* was a spin-off of the Atari coin-op *Drag Race* and Kaplan's *Kaboom* was based on the Atari coin-op *Avalanche*.

30. Warren Robinett, tired of Atari's policy of no author credit for game designers, decided to sign his game, *Adventure*, in an obscure secret room in the program. He never even told his fellow designers about this for fear of word getting out and he being reprimanded. Ultimately, a 12-year-old boy in Salt Lake City discovered the secret room where it was written: "Created by Warren Robinett." To his surprise, Robinett was never punished. He too left Atari shortly thereafter.

*The popularity of Robinett's "easter egg" prompted Atari to release future games with similar surprises deliberately inserted.*

Atari Archives