The First Home Consoles: Crash Course Games #5

Crash Course: Games
https://youtube.com/watch?v=npOPGrAcFLg
https://nerdfighteria.info/v/npOPGrAcFLg

Hi, I'm Andre Meadows and this is Crash Course Games.
Last week we focused on the dawn of the video game industry, and the early dominance of the Atari, but the Atari didn't exist in a vacuum. There were many other companies vying for players quarters, and trying to get their consoles into players' homes.

Home consoles allowed for video games to integrate deeply into people's lives, and were important to the evolution of the industry and the art form. So if we're going to get a handle on early video game history, we're going to have to look at the rest of the video game industry during the funky 1970s. Can you dig it.

(Intro)

Now although Atari did come to dominate the competition with their beloved 2600, Atari didn't invent the home video game console. Game historians generally point to the Magnavox Odyssey as the early pioneer in getting games onto home televisions. The Odyssey was the brain-child of a man named Ralph Baer, who's been called the Father of Video Games, not to be confused with Nolan Bushnell who has been called The Father of the Video Gaming Industry.

Ralph Baer was born in Germany in 1922, migrated to America, and began a lifelong love affair with technology. In 1951, Ralph conceived an idea for an interactive TV device. But he couldn't get his employers interested in the idea. But like any good unappreciated genius he struggled on for the next 15 years, until he was able to make his dream a reality. Let's go to the Thought Bubble.

By 1966, prices for televisions had fallen, and TVs were in over 40 million homes in the United States. Once Baer's idea finally started moving, like a lot of developments in early video gaming, things happened fast. He drew up schematics for a new console in a less than a week, and his employers were impressed enough to assign a small development team to the project.

By 1967, the team had a working table tennis game, that would later go on to inspire Atari's Pong. They called the system the Brown-Box and began shopping it around to large manufacturers. They eventually licensed the technology to the Magnavox corporation, and the Odyssey appeared in stores in 1972.

Now the Odyssey wasn't a game system as we think about them today. Rather than using game software that runs on a computer, like later consoles, the Odyssey's "games" were really just electrical connectors in a massive circuit between the television and the system. The Odyssey featured game cards that were inserted into the machine, which closed different loops in the giant circuit, and changed the output to the television. The games were all very similar, and extremely simple by today's standards, but at the time, they were kind of amazing.

While the Odyssey was simple, it was also revolutionary, and it launched with a lot of features that would become standard in video consoles. It featured one of gaming's earliest commercial light guns, allowing players to shoot at their "screen" and hunt dinosaurs and ghosts. The Odyssey's development team also determined that game systems should be hooked up to TVs, and presented on channels 3 or 4, which became the console industry's standard procedure for decades. Thanks, Thought Bubble.

So, The Odyssey was groundbreaking, and amazing, and inspirational, but it was quickly improved upon and subsequently forgotten. Atari's Video Computer System or VCS 2600 hit the market in 1977, and once again revolutionized home gaming. The Atari 2600 was a massive improvement over the Magnavox Odyssey. The console was the first to feature two joysticks, which made home gaming feel more like playing in an arcade. The games were also much more graphically complex, and they were in color! Just like real life! Look at those graphics! That looks, like, real! Real world right there on my TV!

Adventure set the standard for the exploratory game genre and influenced video games like *The Legend of Zelda*, *Final Fantasy*, and *Tomb Raider*. *Adventure* also contained the first "Easter Egg", or hidden feature. At the time, Atari's leadership didn't give individual designers and developers any sort of public facing credits for the games they made.

Those unskippable credit rolls at the end of games, they weren't a thing yet. The game's designer, Warren Robinett, didn't like the lack of recognition, so he built a room into the game with his name in it. This took up 5% of his game's overall storage; not insignificant. That "feature" stayed hidden from the non-crediting jerks in Atari management until after the game had sold hundreds of thousands of copies, and a young player wrote a letter asking about the message.

Spoiler alert: the developer didn't get fired. And in the decades since, designers have been hiding small surprises in their games, and players have been delighted in finding them. Another thing Atari helped introduce to gaming culture was third-party developers. Several disgruntled key employees from Atari left the company. They were upset at the lack of recognition, unless they pulled a Warren Robinett and put their name in the game as an Easter Egg, and because they also weren't happy with how the company was managed.

They founded Activision, the first outside company that developed games for the Atari 2600. This is now standard practice in the video game world. Actually Activision is still doing it themselves with games like *Call of Duty* and *Skylanders*. While Atari had the dominant home console, it was not alone in the video game market. Toy company Mattel got into the act and released the Intellivision in 1979. While it was able to grab some of Atari's market share, it never managed to overtake the 2600.

But the Intellivision system was known for its improved graphics and sound quality. But the system's controllers, that looked like calculators, literally they had numbers on them, they have been called some of the most uncomfortable controllers ever made. Sorry Intellivision, I'm just keeping it 100. Which I can actually type on your calculator-looking controller.

Now here is where it starts getting nasty: Mattel put up a strong marketing fight against Atari by showing side-by-side comparison ads with political commentator George Plimpton. These were some of the first ads to directly tout the supremacy of one system over another. Something I think we're going to see again in the future.

And while Mattel's console was always second string, the company did contribute some genuine gaming innovations. In 1977, the company released one of the first hand-held games, Mattel Electronics' Football, an ancestor to the many handheld gaming devices that followed, like Game Boys, Nintendo 3DS, Game Gear, Atari Lynx. See Mattel, you were better than Atari in the mobile market.

By 1978 Mattel was selling upwards to 500,000 of these handheld games per week. Gaming had been brewing across the Pacific in Japan for some time, and an invasion of the alien landed in America. Thanks to *Space Invaders*. Designed by 34 year old Tomohiro Nishikado, made by Taito of Japan, and released in America in 1978 by Midway.

Space invaders was a massive hit in arcades, and demand for home versions of it helped spur on the success of the Atari console.

Space Invaders was the first official licensing of an arcade game and this quadrupled the Atari 2600's sales.

Space Invaders was one of the early successes for a Japanese game in the American market, but it would by no means be the last. *Space Invaders*' success foreshadowed the future success of Japanese gaming giants like this one company you might have heard of them, um, Sega. And there was this other company before that, uh, you might of heard of it, I don't know, named Nintendo. Does that ring a bell? You know what we'll get into that next time. Thanks for watching.

Stan Muller: Crash Course Games is filmed in the Chad and Stacy Emigholz Studio in Indianapolis, Indiana and it's made with the help of all these nice people. If you'd like to keep Crash Course free for everyone forever, you can support the series at Patreon, a crowdfunding platform that allows you to support the content you love. Speaking of Patreon, we'd like to thank all our patrons in general and we'd like to specifically thank our High Chancellor of Knowledge Morgan Lizop and our Vice Principal Michael Hunt. Thank you for your support.