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OUR TAKE ON 2 THROWBACK MIRRORLESS CAMERAS

FAST TIMES WITH ACER'S ICONIA TAB A510

ATARI ICON

TRACING THE CULTURAL IMPACT OF A GAMING HEAVYWEIGHT

READING IN THE DARK WITH NOOK'S GLOWLIGHT

MAKING THE CASE FOR APPLE'S 'TOASTER-FRIDGE'

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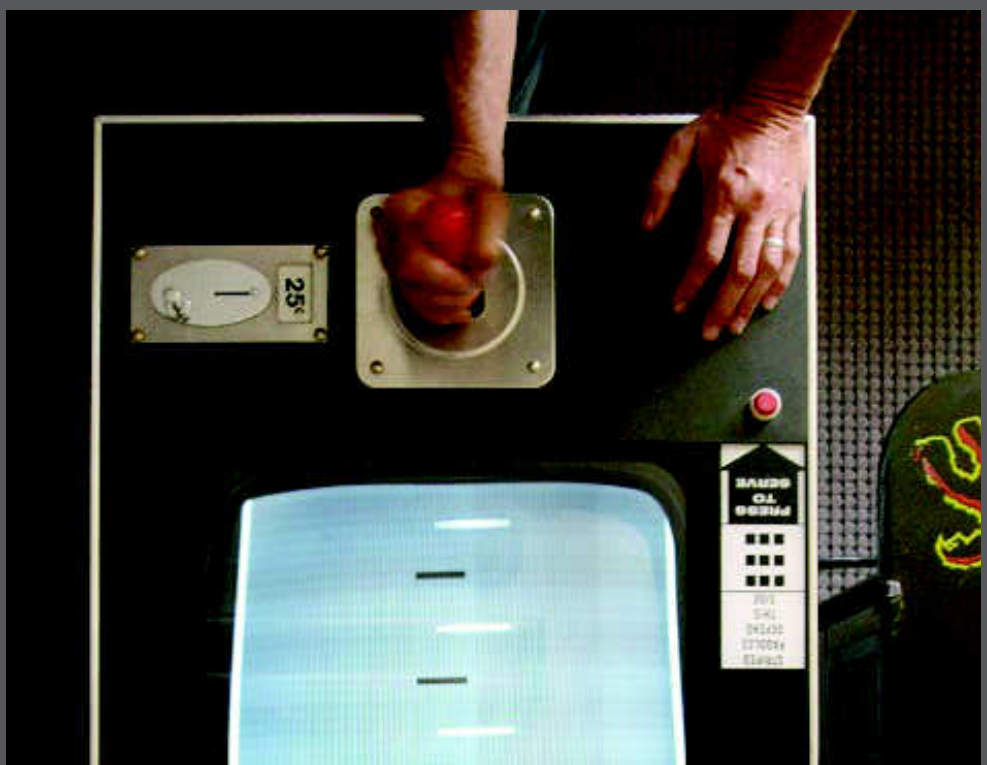
Lynn Goldsmith/CORBIS

Token Memories

TOP: *Kate Pierson of The B-52s (circa 1982) flirts with the camera and sacrifices crucial game time.*

RIGHT: *A mid-70s cocktail table classic, "Futsball."*



Michael Macor/San Francisco Chronicle/Corbis

BELOW: *The scene at a Hollywood arcade in 1982 — the influence of Atari and blowdriers is evident.*

Bettmann/CORBIS

Visualized

The History of Atari: 1971-1977 & 1978-1981

By Steve Fulton
Gamasutra

Looking for some further reading on Atari following this week's issue? Then we'd recommend starting with this exhaustive two-part history of the company published by *Gamasutra* in 2007 and 2008. Written by game historian Steve Fulton, the first installment traces the company's origins and early years, from Pong to its entry into the home market, while the second looks at the company's "golden years" — a period marked by the success of the Atari 2600 game console and its continued run of hits in arcades. Another option, in book form, is *Racing the Beam* by Nick Montfort and Ian Bogost (published by MIT Press), which looks specifically at the Atari 2600 from both a technical and cultural perspective.

AROUND THE WEB

Machine Politics
By David Kushner
The New Yorker

By far the most in-depth profile to date of George Hotz, the infamous hacker who first unlocked the iPhone and then cracked the PlayStation 3 — a move that caused him to be sued by Sony and won him the backing of Anonymous, whether he liked it or not.

The Library of Utopia
By Nicholas Carr
Technology Review

A look at the state of two ambitious book-scanning projects: one from Google that remains tied up in the courts, and another backed by a Harvard-led group that may be able to make some progress where its rival has not — from Nicholas Carr, author of *The Shallows*.

The Dawn of Haiku OS
By Ryan Leavengood
IEEE Spectrum

Haiku OS may face an uphill battle to become anything more than a niche operating system, but like the one it draws on (the ill-fated BeOS), the story behind it is a fascinating one. Here, Ryan Leavengood brings us up to speed by taking us right back to the beginning.

She's Playing Games With Your Lives
By Bruce Feiler
The New York Times

Another profile of a figure slightly less controversial than George Hotz, but who's still sparked a fair bit of debate. Jane McGonigal is best known as a game designer who's pushing the boundaries of what a "game" is — and her latest, *SuperBetter*, is no exception.

Recommended Reading

ATARI ICON

TRACING THE CULTURAL IMPACT OF A GAMING HEAVYWEIGHT

BY JAMES TREW

"WE'VE OPTIONED *ASTEROIDS* for a movie to Universal. We're being cautious about it, but we're optimistic something will get done there."

Jim Wilson, current CEO of Atari, is enthusiastic about the overwhelming number of licensing deals Atari is exploring right now. Which, for a brand with nearly 40 years in the technology business,

and more than its fair share of ups and downs, is not bad going.

"The one thing that I've been astounded by since I've been here is the number of weekly requests that we get from filmmakers, TV producers, writers and musicians who want to incorporate some aspect of Atari, even just in the background of a TV show, or movie," he continues.

By now, there's a good chance you've already conjured up the image of that famous three-pronged "Fuji" logo. Unsurprising, really, given how many early, joyful encounters with technology in which it's had a cameo. While everyone's Atari story is unique, history tells us they often contain similar touchpoints, creating an interwoven, yet collective affection for the gaming pioneer.

If you are of a certain age, for example, it's probable that your gaming cherry was lovingly taken by an Atari mistress. Younger generations, on the other hand, will be unable to ignore the impact of the brand, even if it's without them knowing it, like when they're finding their seats for *Asteroids the Movie*.

How, then, has a brand that's been through some pretty drastic changes, periods of innovation, invention, abundance, mishandling and, even, landfill in New Mexico, endured? And not only in as much as it's still trading, but in the sense that it continues to write engaging stories, indoctrinate followers and inspire movie spin-offs.

IMAGES COURTESY ATARI

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It's the early '70s, and a young Nolan Bushnell is working in an amusement park, surrounded by games.

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It was a tight grip on teenage minds that made the early '80s a lucrative period for Atari.

FROM PONG TO POING
After Warner sold off the Consumer Electronics and Home Computer divisions of Atari to Tramel Technology LTD, it introduced the Atari 520ST.

ART-ARI
As well as the tangible impact on music, the effect Atari's had on the broader art world is not to be underestimated.

THE NEW STYLE
As you're no doubt aware, Atari lives on today, and the show is far from over.

ATARI ICON

PLUGGING IN

IT'S THE EARLY '70s, and a young Nolan Bushnell is working in an amusement park, surrounded by games. Pinball and air hockey machines pepper the floor. Unaware of just how right he was, Bushnell already thought that if he could somehow create a game with the technology he had been learning about, it might prove popular with the quarter-laden kids passing through his doors.

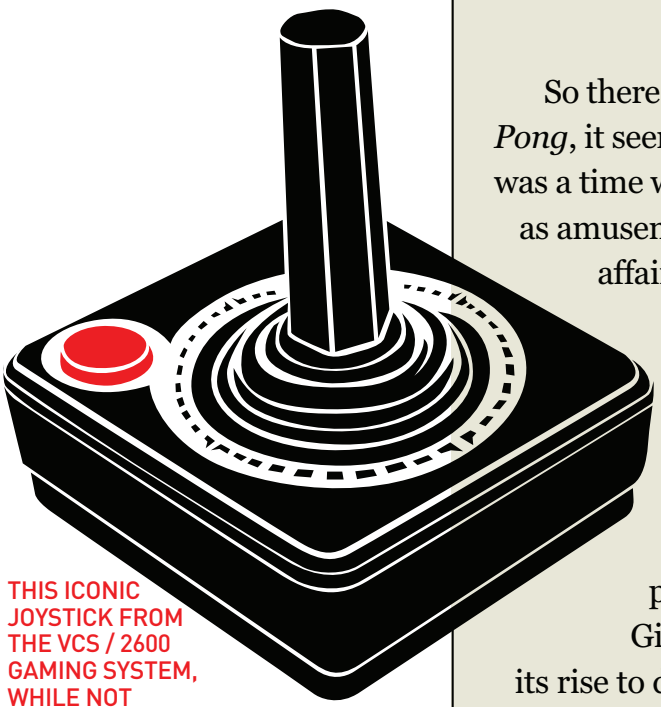
"I knew the economics of the arcade business well," Bushnell, Atari's co-founder, chuckles to me over the phone. He's affectionately recounting how the first seed for creating a video game took root. Roots that would grow deeper than even he likely imagined, starting in 1972 with *Pong* — originally just a training exercise for the first engineer — and persisting to the present day.

"Technologically, we created a methodology that allowed the video game to be introduced about eight years ahead of when it would have been done anyway. Remember that Atari started before the microprocessor was invented, and that wasn't strong enough to do anything until about '77, '78."

It's not until that anecdote really sinks in that you realize how ahead of its time Atari truly was — it didn't even bother to wait for the microprocessor. But, and possibly more surprising than that, Atari's new creation was already having a surprising social impact.

"It turns out that women have better small muscle coordination than men do. Guys couldn't believe that this 105-pound woman could beat them [at *Pong*] in a bar. There were women *Pong* hustlers that made a lot of money wagering against these big jocks." Bushnell beams, almost proudly, before coyly adding, "Hundreds and hundreds of people have told me over the years that they met their husband or wife playing *Pong* in a bar!"

ATARI'S FIRST SELF-BRANDED HOME GAMING SYSTEM, THE PONG CONSOLE, ARRIVED IN 1976. IT WAS CODENAMED DARLENE.



THIS ICONIC JOYSTICK FROM THE VCS / 2600 GAMING SYSTEM, WHILE NOT THE MOST ERGONOMIC, WILL ALWAYS BE A CLASSIC.

So there is, quite literally, an Atari generation, and *Pong*, it seems, is the rightful godparent. Remember, this was a time when video games were as prevalent in bars as amusement arcades, and as such they were a social affair, one that brought people together.

Of course, it wasn't long before Atari would practically invent the domestic gaming market as well with *Home Pong*, but it would have to wait until the release of the VCS (Video Computer System) in 1977 before we would start to see it's ubiquitous logo really pop up in living rooms and dens across the land.

Given Atari's head start, it's easy to think that its rise to dominance was unburdened, but that would be doing a disservice to its creators. Even at the beginning, Bushnell and his colleagues understood the importance of brand, and by imbuing it with core values from the start, they would help set it aside from the ever-growing competition that was starting to show up from the likes of Coleco and Mattel's Intellivision.

"The brand started developing when I got a guy called George Opperman in. He developed the Fuji Logo. He taught me the importance of brand," says Bushnell.

From that point he would become a stickler for maintaining a look and feel, ensuring that Atari would stand for creativity and innovation; a decision that clearly paid off. After all, how many of you still see the Coleco logo? Or have an iPad accessory inspired by your Mattel console?

Of course, Atari's biggest legacy will always be its games, but there are other elements of today's technology industry that might not have happened without them, and we don't just mean the conception of future developers after a heated bout of Pong. In the early days, the company had what Bushnell calls a "party culture:" the workplace was fun, less formal than other technology setups. Something he thinks helped them along in the early years. By creating an egalitarian environment, he feels they were able to encourage loyalty and creativity, which ultimately trickled down into better products. This style

"HUNDREDS AND HUNDREDS OF PEOPLE HAVE TOLD ME OVER THE YEARS THAT THEY MET THEIR HUSBAND OR WIFE PLAYING PONG IN A BAR!"

of working, of course, would become the norm across the burgeoning Silicon Valley, and while it's hard to attribute this just to Atari, with some impressive alumni – both Steve Jobs and Wozniak, for example, would do a spell at the firm — it's not hard to imagine this model permeating into the consciousness of those who experienced it.

Ultimately, Bushnell would sell a successful company on to the monolithic entertainment mainstay Warner, and a new chapter would be ushered in. But in another universe, Atari's reach might have spread much, much further than most companies, or even governments for that matter, could have hoped.

"We were all geared up to create a telephone-linked game system. In fact, Atari had the patents on the fastest modems at the time, and our plan was to put little closets in various cities, so it was only a local telephone call to modems, and then link them together with T1 telephone lines to make a quasi-national network. This was 1976!" Bushnell says.

The idea was to simply allow users to play together by sharing joystick data over the network. The truth of the matter is, when applied to other data, this network bore a striking resemblance to something that would come later, and there's a good chance you're using it right now.

"It turns out that the packets look surprisingly similar to the IP stack of the internet," Bushnell says. "I've always been curious that, if we'd just launched that, and improved on it and improved on it, that it may have turned into the internet – and Atari would have owned it! I'll never know."

Bushnell laughs at this near miss with a heartiness that suggests that it was no biggie. He would later go on to see the company he started manhandled, and bent into completely different shapes, but that's not to say that Atari doesn't still play a small part in his daily routine.

"I've got all the Atari titles on my iPhone; I still play those a lot. I still love *Asteroids*, I still love *Battle Zone*, and I still love *Centipede*."

PLAYLIST

Nolan Bushnell
Atari Founder

There are basically three [favorites]: *Breakout*, *Tempest* and *Asteroids*, all of which were important for different reasons, having to deal with their playability, timelessness and the fact that they all represented big technical steps. *Tempest* was the first color vector graphics game; *Asteroids* was the first Atari microprocessor game; and *Breakout* turned out to be highly successful after no one had believed in my design. I had Jobs take it on because none of the other engineers believed in it.

ATARI ICON

DARLENE, DOLLARS AND THE DESERT

"You'd get down to that last dollar in your pocket, and you'd have a choice: do I keep the dollar, and get home on the bus, or do I spend it, and call my parents and say 'I accidentally forgot?'"

Curt Vendel, company historian and author, explains his indoctrination to the Atari clan.

"I tried that, it worked twice, then finally my mother says, 'You know what? You need to learn your lesson. You can walk home."

It was a tight grip on teenage minds that made the early '80s a lucrative period for Atari. Having seen how well its titles were doing in the coin-ops, the firm worked hard to bring that experience out of the dollar-swallowing arcades, and into the front room. Unfortunately, it would be with some mixed success.

"You want to talk about the game that earned the most attention, this is really the coup for Atari, and what lights the fire under the 2600. *Space Invaders*, the first home licensed arcade game. It comes out, and people are going out and buying consoles just so they can play it," Vendel explains.

ADVENTURE FOR THE ATARI 2600 WAS ONE OF THE FIRST GAMES TO INCORPORATE EASTER EGGS.

This may seem like no surprise in the present day, but in 1980 it was unheard of — Atari just invented the killer app. Unfortunately, the company was to learn that a name is not enough, and the same strategy would backfire famously the next time they tried it. *Pac Man*, the hottest arcade title of its time, was also licensed for the (renamed VCS) 2600 console. A sure fire hit you would have thought. There was just one problem: the conversion was a flop, and many fans of the coin-op were left bitterly disappointed. So much so that the firm was left with a vast excess of cartridges that they couldn't even give away.

"Here's Atari, saddled with millions of copies of *Pac Man* they couldn't sell... then of course the famous story of them being dumped down in Alamogordo, New Mexico, where they dumped them in a landfill and poured concrete over them. It was a write off," Vendel says.

While this might have

PHOTO BY ANNA G. DICKSON

THE CONTROL CENTER Blow the dust off the contacts, slot it and go. Atari was the portal to exciting new worlds, battling aliens, saving princesses and shooting for the highscore, all at the cost of a few blisters and many sleepless nights.

earned Atari an unwanted page in the gaming history books, the company would soon embark on one of its most awkward periods. Increasing competition would saturate the market, and a confusing hardware release strategy — that included everything from home computers like the XL model, to the "AtariTel" Luma desktop video phone and the ambitious "Mindlink" peripheral — would see the brand Bushnell had worked hard to establish, and that had captured the imaginations of Vendel's generation, hit bumpy financial ground.

Vendel, however, believes it's more than just the products or games that saw the company survive. Something else had been going on that was more important, and would reach much more deeply into the impressionable minds of tech fans of the time.

"Atari was born out of the Silicon Valley lore and myth," he says. "Great stories about the guys: they were hippies, and they were building these incredible machines, and giving all these cool code names to their projects. For example, the Home Pong console, the code name was Darlene. It added to the whole myth and lore, and it became sexy and alluring."

"You then start reading in the video game magazines: 'The game programmer's name is in this secret room, inside *Adventure*.' Or, 'If you play level 13 on the home version of *Missile Command* and you fire all the missiles and get zero points, it puts the guys initials at the bottom corner.'"

PLAYLIST

Curt Vendel, Atari Historian

My favorite Atari game? I don't have one specific, but my favorite games would be 2600 *Adventure*, it was the first Atari 2600 game I ever played, it mesmerized me and that was what gave me the "Atari bug" so to speak. My other favorite was Atari 400 / 800 *Star Raiders*, it was one of the most sophisticated space fighter games of its time and still holds its own even today.

Atari was — knowingly or otherwise — creating a sense of belonging, be it with its use of Easter eggs or the quirky products that would help build its cultural identity. This meant the users would start to build a relationship with the company on a more personal level.

There are still people who develop games for the 2600 to this day, even creating box art and packaging. Of course, a fondness for throwback video games is one thing, but when you're getting re-issued Atari breakfast cereal, belts, sneakers and, of course, T-shirts, something else must be helping the company dance into the hearts of so many new fans.

The early '80s was definitely a golden era for many, one that would eventually be marred by an industry-wide gaming crash in 1983. The following year Jack Tramiel, founder of Commodore, looking to return to the computer industry, would buy the majority share in the firm, and usher in a new era. The fruits of which would include the popular ST computer series, the innovative Lynx handheld, and the ill-fated, yet technologically solid Jaguar. If nothing else, this would represent a time when the original core values of Atari would return, albeit under a different leader. This also represents a period when the brand would start influencing once more in ways that might not necessarily have been planned.

IN 1989 THE ATARI LYNX BOASTED A COLOR LCD, A FIRST IN HANDHELD ELECTRONIC GAMING.

ATARI ICON

FROM PONG TO POING

AFTER WARNER SOLD OFF the Consumer Electronics and Home Computer divisions of Atari to Tramel Technology LTD, it introduced the Atari 520 ST. It was this computer that would possibly cause one of the more enduring — and surprising — cultural offshoots.

As a last minute decision, Atari added MIDI ports to the ST, which had never been done on a computer before. The outfit also wired them right into the main processor (instead of using a parallel bus, for example), which made them extremely effective. Accidentally, the firm had just created a powerful and, more importantly, affordable home music computer.

To put this in perspective, the Fairlight CMI Sampling Synthesizer, used by the likes of Stevie Wonder and Herbie Hancock (search YouTube to see the latter using one on Sesame Street), cost

tens of thousands of dollars. The Atari ST was priced at less than $1,000.

David Etheridge, working musician, lecturer and overseer of the official Atari Music chat boards for *Sound on Sound Magazine*, elaborates: "I think Atari were surprised (and probably delighted) by the explosion of interest from the music community. Remember that the addition of MIDI ports was essentially an afterthought. I'm guessing that Atari were probably thinking of the ST as a general purpose computer."

And this isn't just a phenomenon of the '80s, many people (including David) still use the Atari ST to this day.

"Atari's timing and sheer musicality beats more recent computers hands down," he says. "There are reports that the hip-hop and dance fraternity are coming back to the Atari as a desktop alternative to the beloved Akai MPC range, and there are one or two noted classical composers who still create scores and parts on the Atari."

The impact of the Atari ST on music in the '90s, especially electronic music, is therefore immeasurable. For a few hundred dollars, budding musicians could unleash their creativity on an unsuspecting world. Rave culture in particular would feed on this new source of innovation.

Maurice Steenbergen is one half of Dutch dance act Rotterdam

ATARI 1040ST, A DIRECT DESCENDANT OF THE BREAKTHROUGH ORIGINAL 520ST.

Termination Source. Their 1992 European hit single "Poing" crossed well over into the mainstream, despite its humble, Atari-based beginnings.

"I got my first Atari in 1991," Steenbergen remembers. "I sold that one in 1995 when I eventually switched to Mac, but I re-bought another one last year because I needed to open some old songs for re-recording. I also used it to re-record "Poing" from the original disks.

At the time, I ran Cubase and had an Akai S950 sampler. The Atari propelled electronic music, it made MIDI available to people who weren't engineers. It was a way more intuitive way to make music, so I think it pioneered the MIDI / bedroom scene."

Other artists were even more inspired by the Atari, even naming themselves after it. German "Digital Hardcore" group Atari Teenage Riot, came windmilling onto the rock-electronic crossover scene in the early '90s, with a 1040ST firmly under its arm.

"We've programmed the beats for our songs on this computer since we started in 1992," the band's Alec Empire explains. "It's a very stable machine that does the things we need it to do very well. It has a special timing, groove and attack to it that gives us a characteristic sound. It only has 2MB RAM, which is insane when you think about it. Yes, two MEGABYTES, not gigabytes... I love this little thing."

Despite a dedicated following, as was to be a reoccurring theme for the Atari brand, a mishmash of over-cooking ideas, and misguided project development would ultimately steer the ST range off the rails. As David Etheridge neatly puts it:

"By the time of the Atari Falcon, things were a complete mess; it hadn't been developed properly, and bugs in MultiTOS (the multitasking operating system) took 18 months to sort out. The Falcon could have been a Mac killer, but by the time Atari had its act together, Apple had snatched the lead away, and the rest is history."

PLAYLIST

Maurice Steenbergen

Producer, Rotterdam Termination Source

Gods was an amazing platform game with great graphics for the time. I can remember the green and gold interface like it was yesterday.

DUTCH GABBER DUO ROTTERDAM TERMINATION SOURCE (MAURICE AT LEFT) WITH AN ATARI ST IN THE BACKGROUND AND PROUDLY HOLDING THEIR 1992 VINYL 12" "POING."

PHOTO COURTESY MAURICE STEENBERGEN

ATARI ICON

ART-ARI

AS WELL AS THE TANGIBLE IMPACT on music, the effect Atari's had on the broader art world is not to be underestimated. Be it the proliferation of 8-bit-infused retro graphic design, or straight-up Atari inspired art, the visual influence of the brand can be seen far and wide.

LA-based gallery iam8bit is an example of how deep this inspiration goes. The gallery specializes in American culture, with a focus on video game art. Atari's hand in this inspiration is no more apparent than in the work of one of its alumni, Jason Brockert. He's had a solo show at the gallery, and one of his collections is not only inspired by, but directly illustrates his fondness for the brand, featuring the old consoles and cartridges themselves.

"As an artist, I loved these things, I just had a personal connection, I had three parents, and Atari was the third one," Brockert says. "When things put an imprint on you when you're that young, they just keep coming up, and every time you find the old games you feel those emotions."

While this might seem true for all things in our childhood, not everything continues to inspire people in the same way when they get older. Brockert goes on to make the example of his wife's Cabbage Patch dolls:

"I teach college, and my kids all know Atari. They don't all know Cabbage Patch, though. They, of course, all know Barbie, so it's sort of 'the first and the best'

ATARI ENLISTED THE TALENTS OF DC COMICS' GERRY CONWAY AND ROY THOMAS TO BREATHE ARTISTIC LIFE INTO THEIR GAMES, RESULTING IN THE ATARI FORCE COMIC BOOK SERIES.

that seems to stick.

I've had kids come in with the retro T-shirts that they buy at Urban Outfitters, etc. Their experience is different — it's more about that three-striped symbol, with the Atari name underneath. I guess it's just retained a certain coolness factor for whatever reason."

One of those reasons, as Brockert points out, could be that the purchasing team at Urban Outfitters is, perhaps, comprised of buyers of a certain age, who were either fans of the brand the first time around, or recognise its continued relevance.

But what about the artwork used by Atari itself? That, too, is part of its identity, and still resonates with people who had the games when they first came out. It's unsurprising that a lot of effort went into this, as it was an easy, if not optimistic, way for making up for the actual machine's lack of graphical prowess.

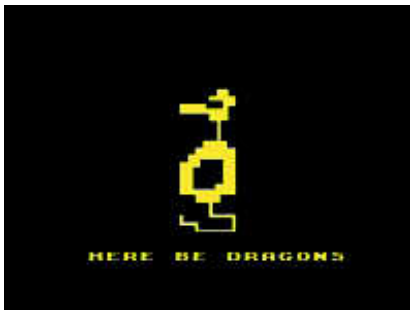
"The *Adventure* Atari cartridge is my favorite," Brockert says. "Not because the game was any good, but because that picture on the front just lead you down a path, like, 'Oh my god, what's going to happen when I put this in the machine?'"

This is a tactic that the company took to extremes while under Warner's control. The media giant also happened to own DC Comics, and putting two and two together, they realised they had a marketing tool too good to ignore. Prolific comic book creators Gerry Conway and Roy Thomas were duly commissioned to create a comic series to give a rich visual companion to the brand, which resulted in *Atari Force*.

"They thought that when people saw the comics, they would transfer that in their minds over to the mediocre graphics on the video games as they were, you know 30 years ago," Thomas explains. "That was the age of space invaders and these rather crude games. So anything that would improve the visual aspect of the games, as they couldn't do it on the computer screen yet. They would complement that by doing comic books.

If you see a drawing by Ross Andru, Dick Giordano,

"THEY THOUGHT THAT WHEN PEOPLE SAW THE COMICS, THEY WOULD TRANSFER THAT IN THEIR MINDS OVER TO THE MEDIOCRE GRAPHICS ON THE VIDEO ...."



THIS 8-BIT DRAGON BECAME A FAMILIAR SIGHT FOR *ADVENTURE*-OUS GAMERS

or George Pérez of the *Sword Quest* or *Atari Force* scene, that would kind of carry over to the games, and help them seem a little more real to you, potentially. It was coldly and crassly calculated, but that doesn't prevent you sometimes from doing some interesting work."

They say that life imitates art, and on this occasion that cliché rings true. Conway and Thomas were heavily involved in the creation of the *Sword Quest* game series from the ground up. It was a four-parter, each one coming with a special edition companion comic to help dress up the story, but only the first three would make it onto shelves.

"We basically became partners in creating the *Sword Quest* games, which were *Earth World*, *Water World*, *Fire World* and *Air World*. Although not quite all those games or the comics associated with them came out," Thomas says.

And, alas, another ambitious Atari project would suffer from boardroom anxiety, which is a shame, given that plans were already underway to have *Sword Quest* crossover into the real world with an elaborate treasure hunt tie-in. Thomas elaborates:

"Basically they were going to bury some kind of sword. They were hiding it somewhere, and there would be clues embedded by the engineers in these four games as to where it might be. The idea was that the person who found it would have a fabulous prize."

Sadly, someone else had a similar idea with a book, and that resulted in lawsuits when would-be treasure hunters started digging up land that wasn't theirs to dig, in search of the bounty. Atari got cold feet, and dropped the idea — and the game — before completion.

"For all I know, the sword might still be out there," says Thomas. "I don't know if they ever actually buried it."

So if you have the existing *Sword Quest* games, a cunning mind and enough to cover some potential legal fees...

AMERICAN ICON – ATARI *ADVENTURE* CARTRIDGE BY JASON BROCKERT

PLAYLIST

Jason Brockert
Artist

As the little green square drifted across the TV screen in its shimmering mission, the tension in my 1980 living room was palpable. When the feared red dragon entered the screen I was transported to the anxious edge of my 9-year-old imagination. Atari *Adventure's* lure held me captive for over a year of my young life and I still feel a pang when I hold that magical cartridge in now somewhat older hands.

THE NEW STYLE

AS YOU'RE NO DOUBT AWARE, Atari lives on today, and the show is far from over. In its current form, the company has gone back to basics: games. In many ways, this is where the old and new worlds meet. Much of what came before: the games, the logo, the brand, remain, but with a new modern spin. Titles such as *Asteroids* and *Breakout* have been revisited and given a present-day twist, re-imagined for the modern era.

ATARI IS A FEEL-GOOD BRAND. PEOPLE LOVE ATARI. PEOPLE HAVE GREAT MEMORIES OF ATARI, AND I FEEL THAT MILLIONS UPON MILLIONS OF PEOPLE COULD WRITE THEIR ATARI STORY. WE'VE EVEN THOUGHT ABOUT IT, FACILITATING FOR THE 40TH ANNIVERSARY FOR MILLIONS OF PEOPLE TO TELL US THEIRS.

Jim Wilson
Atari's current CEO

"There were different devices and different technologies that allowed people to do different things. I think this allowed an influence on pop-culture, whether it's music artists or game designers or film makers," says Wilson.

So what of those licensing requests? Well, Bushnell's Atari had a laser-like focus on creativity and innovation, a thread still visible in today's incarnation of the brand. For example, Wilson's Atari is opening the doors to developers to bring new interpretations of classic titles, as evidenced by the recent *Pong* developer challenge.

"We thought it would be a fun thing to do," says Wilson. "It's important for us to build and maintain a good relationship with the development community. This also gives us the opportunity to tap into new ideas, and new ways that people consume games. *Pong* is just the beginning of that."

But for all its similarities, the new face of the company is, perhaps, a little more conservative about where it chooses to be innovative. Some things just come down to a simple matter of business.

"What I wanted to do was make the heart of the brand a little more mass market in feel," Wilson explains. "All about easy to get into, difficult to master experiences, innovation, technology, platform. That really didn't seem to be what Atari was represented as [when it was taken on from previous owner InfoROMS]."

So, while the values remain the same, the methodology, perhaps, is a little more a-la mode. Today's industry is a very different landscape to that of 40 years ago, especially with regards to how people consume games. Licensing out the brand (rather than licensing games in) is a big part of the current business, and can be seen in products like the popular Atari Arcade Duo iPad accessory from Discovery Bay, as well as the company's back catalog.

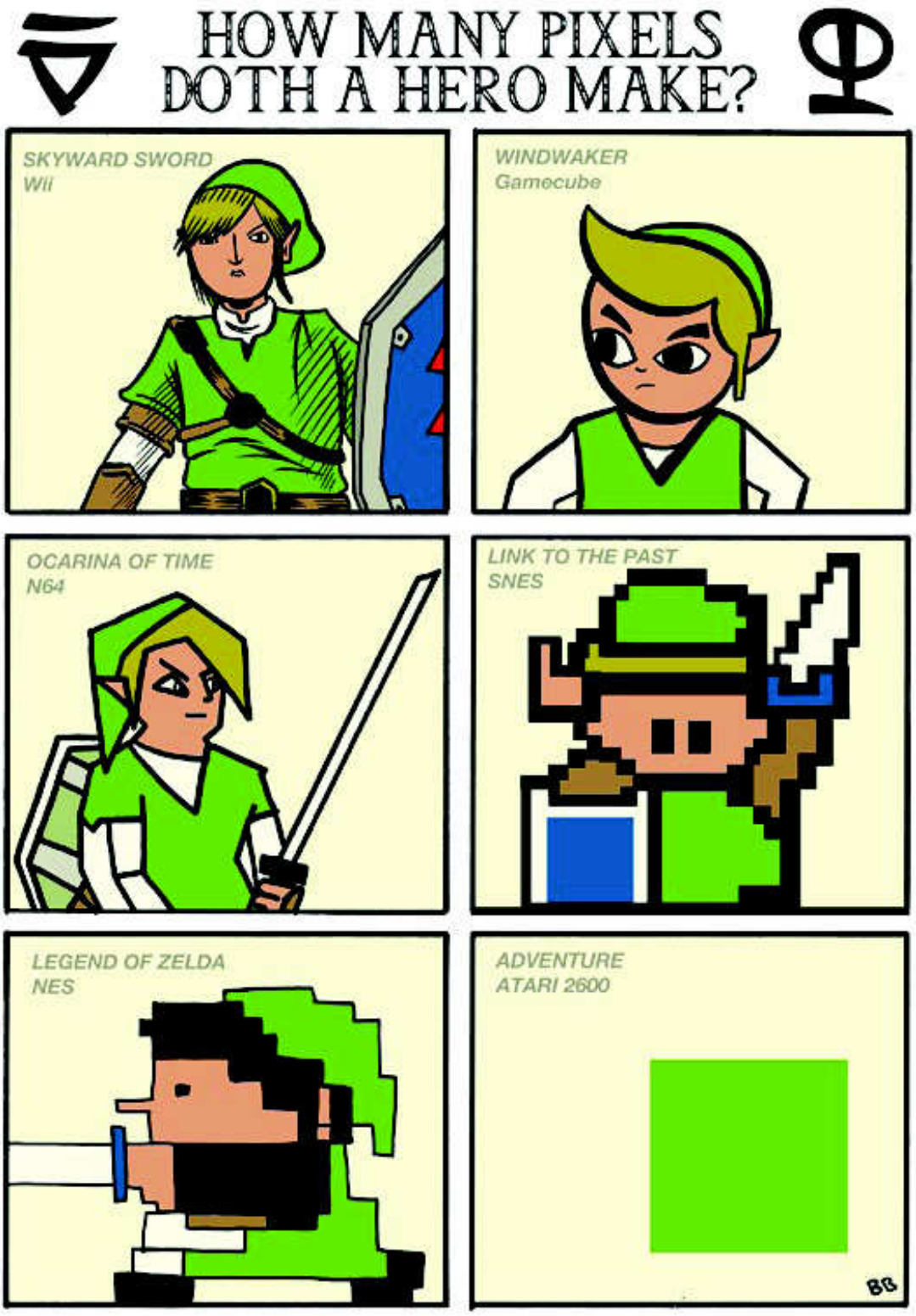
"You know, free-to-play games are obviously the big trend in mobile and online, and it's really up to us to take games that used to make people put quarter after quarter in, put the proverbial virtual quarter in, or microtransaction today," Wilson says.

So, 40 years down the line and Atari has seen many incarnations, some good times, some bad times and a lot of fond memories. But, despite all of this, it keeps the fire of the arcade burning, whether it's via your iPad, Nintendo DS, Flashback console, branded t-shirt, re-issued General Mills cereal boxes or *Asteroids the Movie*.

PLAYLIST

Roy Thomas
Comic Book Writer

My favorite Atari game was *Swordquest*. Never played it, but of course co-wrote the comics series and helped design the game, so got paid. Atari gave me this several-foot-high pile of every game they'd done. I played *Space Invaders* once or twice... wasn't much of a step up from the *Pong* game the Conways had gotten me earlier. I played the TV-screen chess they had once or twice, too. Then I put away, and later gave away, the whole pile to someone, except for a couple of the *Swordquest* games, maybe.



The Last Word - Box Brown

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