PONG: ATARI TIMELINE 1973

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By March of 1973, Pong was deemed a bona fide phenomenon for Atari Inc.. They had sold 8000-10000 machines, and would eventually sell upwards of 35,000.

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Some of the Pong competition in 1973 included: Elepong from Taito, Davis Cup by Taito: each player had two paddles, Computer Space Ball (1972) from Nutting And Associates, Hockey by Ramtek, Hockey TV from Sega,Leader from Midway (a very innovative 4-player pong variant with a wall in the middle for deflection), Olympic Tennis from See-Fun (2 or 4 players), Pro Tennis from Williams Mfg. Co. (4 players), Paddle Battle from Allied Leisure (exact copy of Pong), Paddle-Ball from Williams (exact copy of Pong), Pong Tron from Sega (exact copy of Pong), Pong Tron II from Sega ((exact copy of Pong), Pro Hockey from Taito , Rally from For-Play, TV Hockey from Chicago Coin (exact copy of Pong),T.V. Tennis from US Billiards (exact copy of Pong), TV Ping Pongfrom Chicago Coin (exact copy of Pong), Table Tennis from Nutting Associates (exact copy of Pong), Tennis Tourney from Allied Leisure (4 player pong), Winner from Midway (an exact copy of pong) and Winner IV from Midway.

However, it wasn't just the copycats Atari had to worry about, it was legal problems as well. Magnavox and Ralph Baer did not take kindly to the success of Atari's Pong, especially since they had created a very similar game more than a year earlier. They took Atari to court, suing them over Pong. They used the sign-in-sheet for the 1972 brown-box demo that Bushnell attended as proof that he saw the Magnavox video games before he came up with his own idea.

Skillfully, Nolan Bushnell turned this legal problem into an advantage for Atari. Atari settled with Magnavox, and the case never went to court. They paid a licensing fee close to $800,000 and became the sole licensor of Pong from Magnavox. Maganavox then agreed to go after all of Atari's competitors as part of the deal, which basically freed Atari to create new and different games while the competition was stuck in court.

1973 May: Atari Makes $3.2 Million In Their First Year

With so much competition, how did Atari survive these early years? Two ways. First, they used an early version of a 'Just-In-Time' manufacturing processes. Nolan Bushnell described it this way, 'With expensive parts, such as cabinets, we tried to get them out the same day they came in," he says. "And we made sure that 75% of the cost turned over in less than a week." Secondly, Atari also took advantage of the soaring demand for Pong by insisting on cash payments from distributors instead of going along with the longer terms common in the coin-operated game industry

1973 July: Atari creates Durastress' Trademark

With Space Race, Atari started to advertise their trademarked 'Durastress' technology which was a marketing term for how their cabinets and solid-state electronics were built. They claimed their machines were built to meet 'Military Specification 883' in their brochures and advertising flyers for distributors and operators. This practice would continue into the mid-70's. Military Specification 883 is defined by the Department Of Defense 'Standard Test Methods and Procedures for Microelectronics', and was a requirement for defense contractors. This might not have applied to video games at all, but it sure looked good in their advertising.

1973 July 16: Space Race Introduced By Atari Inc.:
'From The Originators Of Pong''

Space Race was a two-player only game designed by Al Alcorn. This was a timed game involving 2 ships flying towards the top of the screen. Players controlled the vertical position of the ships, and attempted to dodge an asteroid to get to the top of the screen.. If they made it to the top, they received 1 point. The game featured a two-player mode only.. The service manual has 'pong' scratched-out and Space Race written over it. The machine is basically Pong with different ICs. Atari licensed the game to Bally/Midway under the name 'Asteroid'. The hardware was discreet logic with ROM fir ships constructed out of diodes. Advertised as Dura-stress' and marketed with the Innovative Leisure ' slogan.

1973: Late summer/Autumn: Atari Introduces Pong Doubles

'Atari's New Video Game. 2 Or 4 Player

With Competition heating up from the pinball industry and other upstarts, Atari innovated with their own 4-player version of Pong named Pong Doubles (Atari's 3rd game according to Atari Historian Curt Vendal). A discreet logic design. Released in Europe by Atari France as Coup Davis. A sequel to Coupe Davis was released in Europe in 1974 named Coupe Franc.

1973 October: Kee Games To Thwart Distributor Limitations

In October of 1975, Nolan Bushnell decided to grab as much market share as possible by signing exclusive contracts with distributors in each geographic to buy only Atari games. Because most geographic areas had two distributors, Bushnell separately (and semi-secretly) created Kee games.(named after Bushnell friend Joseph Keenan who became president of the company). Kee would sign exclusive contracts with the 2nd distributor in a geographic area. The games that Kee and Atari produced individually were eventually release by both companies with unique names and some cosmetic differences. Nolan Bushnell said of the Kee Games ploy, 'Joe Keenan was my next door neighbor. I told him, 'I'd like to hire you to set up a company called Kee Games. We'll make it look like it's Kee for Keenan, and it will look like you've come in and started up a new coin-op manufacturer.' We gave him our number two man in manufacturing and our number two man in engineering ' Bristow and Williams' Kee Games created their own logo that was first used Oct. 1 1973:

1973 October 11: Atari Introduces Gotcha! Coin-op

'An Amazing Maze Of Fun!'

Gotcha was a B&W Maze game for two players, designed by Al Alcorn and Nolan Bushnell. One player chased the other through a maze. The maze was an ever-shifting wall pattern. As the chaser got closer to the chased a simulated tone get more and more frequent. A 'catch' scored the pursuer a point. Hardware was a discreet logic design. Advertised as Durastress ' and marketed with Atari's Innovative Leisure ' slogan along with 'Another innovative winner from Atari, the leader in video skill games'

1973 November: Atari Finally Get Patent, But It's Too Late

November 1973, Atari was granted a patent for the generating moving symbols on a screen, which they hoped to use to

keep competitors from simply copying their PCBs

1973 November: One Year Of Pong Sale

After one year of operations, in November 1973, Atari built and sold 6000 Pong machines., and sales were about $1,000,000 a month, with $15,000,000 in sales expected by the end of the fiscal year (June 1974)

1973 November: Atari Attends AMOA Show

Atari attended 1973 AMOA show in Chicago in november. Unlike two years prior with Computer Space, when no one seemed to care about Pong, this time Atari generated much interest with a showing of Pong Doubles, and Gotcha.

1973 December: King Pong

Newsweek called Bushnell 'King Pong'. He told the magazine (referring to Pong) 'We've created a whole new market'Players liked Pong because no luck is involved, and the more you played the more skillful you become. Bushnell described Atari's successful process for game design as 'We have to walk a tightrope between reward and frustration'At this time, Atari also acquired one of their most infamous employees: Steve Jobs as was hired as an engineer by Al Alcorn

1973 Year End: Competition Thinks Atari Will Soon Go Away, But Atari continues To Innovate

By the end of 1973, Midway has sold 9000 Pong-type machines opposed to Atari's 6000. Aari was now up against the big boys, and they weren't about to give Atari any credit 'The small companies will be in trouble when the crunch arrives' said Jack Mittel, Vice President of Sales for Williams Electronics.
However, Atari was still trying to push Pong in directions that the competition had never considered. Some of these ideas included prototypes, limited-run and unreleased versions of Pong such as Pong In A Barrel , Doctor Pong, andPuppy Pong.

Pong In A Barrel was a version of Pong created by Atari with a cabinet that looked like a barrel, with a screen on-top and controls on either side.

Doctor Pong was a game designed for professional offices, but never released. The flyer for Doctor Pong described it this way: 'Doctor Pong's simple lines and modern styling will fit the d'cor of professional office'. The game was meant to be placed in doctor's offices to calm kids down as they waited for their appointments.

Possibly one of the the most unique and bizarre game Atari (n)ever created was Puppy Pong. Puppy Pong was basically as Atari Pong without a coin box packaged into a very cute little table top wooden cabinet. The game was tested at Chuck E. Cheese in the mid 1970's, but never released. According to Atari Historian, Curt Vendel : 'Due to legal issues from George Shultz, the creator of Snoopy, Puppy Pong was tested in Pizza Time Theatre's but never sold'. Regan Cheng, the industrial designer for the Puppy Pong cabinet describes the game this way: "The Puppy Pong was originally conceptualized by Nolan Bushnell, Steve Bristow, and various marketing guys. The original idea wasSnoopy Pong for which I designed a red dog house cabinet with Snoopy on top as you see in the comics. The original concept was called Doctor Pong, a unit for pediatrician office waiting rooms to keep children occupied." The flyer for Puppy Pong proudly announced the game to the world like this: 'Here is friendly puppy and his dog house with a familiar game of Pong inside'

Sources:

(Note: The first few years of this timeline appeared on in an article I wrote for ArmchairArcade.com in 2005)

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www.klov.com

Flyer used courtesy of Dan Hower, www.arcadeflyers.com

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