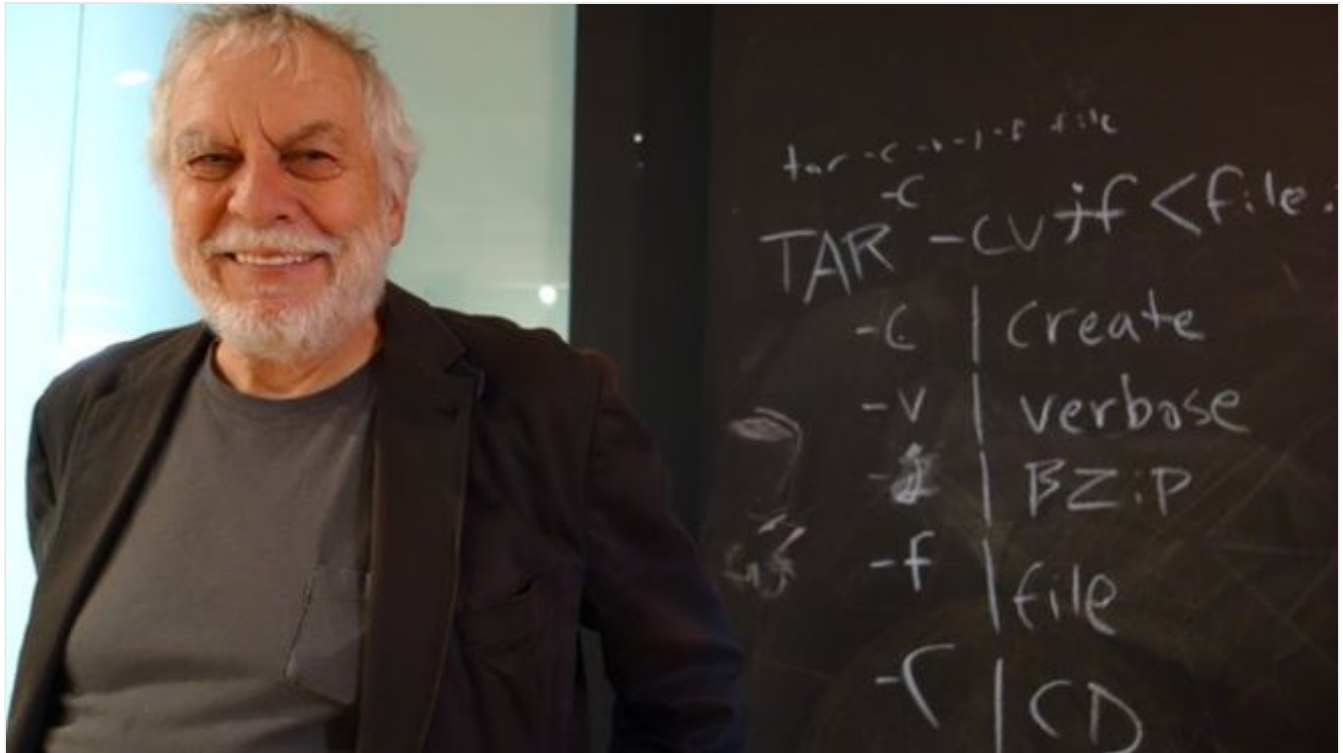


Atari founder Nolan Bushnell on why life is 'a game'



"I have made so many massive mistakes of ego, I can't tell you," says Nolan Bushnell leading the way into his crumbling office two floors above a slightly decrepit Los Angeles row of shops.

Inside the offices of Mr Bushnell's latest start-up - Brainrush - a handful of young men are eagerly banging away on keyboards late on a Saturday afternoon. Ego doesn't seem to be much in evidence here - at least yet.

While the firm, which was created in 2010, has grand ambitions to transform US education via games, Mr Bushnell remains best-known as the man behind a very different gaming enterprise - Atari.

Now 72, he co-founded Atari - the world's first video game company back in 1972. It introduced the concept of personal computing, albeit in game form, to millions of households around the world.

Mr Bushnell is also the man who was initially behind Chuck E Cheese's, the

ubiquitous pizza and gaming restaurant chain that has been the site of many a US child's birthday party (this author included).

But despite all of those early successes - and actually, partly as a result of them - the crumbling office that Mr Bushnell now finds himself in is no deliberately shabby-chic LA decision.



Chuck E Cheese Pizza Time Theater filed for bankruptcy in 1984, but eventually was resurrected as Chuck E Cheese's

After his breakout success in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Mr Bushnell made several missteps that eventually led to some entrepreneurial failures and financial ruin.

"When I was 35, I was insufferable. I thought I could do no wrong and I got really sloppy," he says.

Now, Mr Bushnell has a habit of referring to his own entrepreneurial journey as if it were a never-developed Atari game.

No gore

Mr Bushnell has been a serial entrepreneur from a young age.

He founded a television tube repair business as a teenager that was successful partly because he took advantage of his older customers' penchant to underestimate his technical prowess by undercharging them for his services - but overcharging them for parts.

Later, he worked at amusement parks while putting himself through university to get an electrical engineering degree.



Atari had a no violence rule, which meant that the games often appealed to a wide demographic

He chalks the creation of Atari up to a bit of good luck: "I was probably the only electrical engineer that understood television, and understood the coin-operated game business [from the amusement park] in 1969," he says.

By combining the popularity of arcade games as well as the nascent personal computer industry, Mr Bushnell and his partner Ted Dabney found success

with games such as Pong, Asteroids, and Centipede, which were played, initially, on the Atari 2600 console.

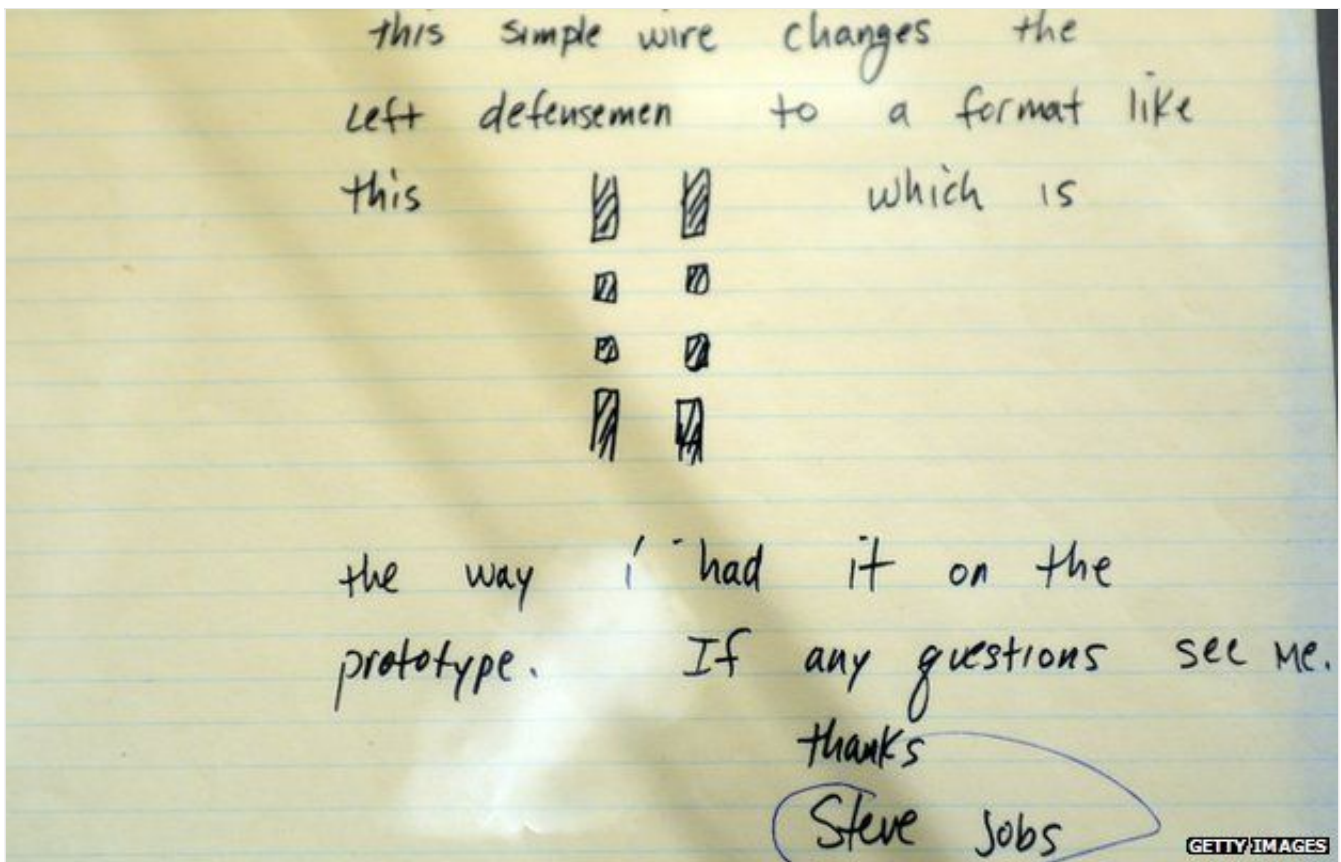
And unlike today's efforts - in which blood and gore in games is both the norm and a scourge - Mr Bushnell said the company believed firmly that it could be successful without resorting to murder.

"We felt that, you could blow up a tank, you could blow up a plane, but we didn't want violence against a human being," he says.

Key hires

Mr Bushnell also emphasises that the popularity of Atari's games was primarily due to his ability to find and hire talented, creative workers, including one you may have heard of - Steve Jobs.

"I've always valued passionate employees over anything else, and, it turns out that there's a huge percentage of the population that are actually dead - they don't know it, but, in terms of their processes, they're just waiting to be buried," says Mr Bushnell.



This memo a 19-year-old Steve Jobs wrote about Atari's World Cup game sold for \$27,500 in 2012

But Mr Jobs, like a lot of his earlier employees, had passion and as a result, "was an extremely hard worker".

"He would sleep under his desk at night, and wake up in the morning ready to go," Mr Bushnell remembers.

That unfortunately did come with a bit of a downside: "I think part of the reason [Steve] smelled bad was 'cause he wouldn't necessarily go home every day."

'Violins and flowers'

When Mr Bushnell decided to sell Atari to Warner Brothers in 1976 for an estimated \$30m (£19m), (a move intended to expand the firm's offerings, but one Mr Bushnell says he now regrets), he carved yet another path, becoming the first of a still-growing list of 20-something Silicon Valley millionaires.

"I want Jobs and [Bill] Gates and [Mark] Zuckerberg and all of these guys to thank me for blazing some of [those trails], because it was much easier once there were several notable successes from [people] in their twenties," he says.

But with that success came hubris.



Atari capitalised on two trends: the popularity of arcade games and new technology surrounding personal computing

By the mid 1980s, both Chuck E Cheese and Atari had basically imploded - as had Mr Bushnell's fortunes. Later efforts, including uWink, an entertainment complex featuring food and games as well as robotic assistants, failed to take off.

But Mr Bushnell remains undeterred, and says he still thinks he has another successful effort in him. He says he's taken inspiration from his children - some of whom have eschewed university in order to immediately start their own entrepreneurial endeavours.

"How many companies have you started by the time you're 18? If the answer's zero, I wouldn't invest in you," he says of their entrepreneurial verve.

He thinks that biotechnology and virtual reality will be game changers - in addition to his efforts to revolutionise schooling in the US by capitalising on research into cutting edge brain science in order to both personalise education and to make courses more adaptable.

He basically wants to make education **as addictive** as Atari's old video games.

"An interesting life can't be all violins and flowers," he says.

"When you lose a game of chess, you don't go and jump off a bridge, you reset the pieces and do it again.

"It's a game!"