You're listening to Imaginary Worlds, a show about how we create them and why we suspend our disbelief. I'm Eric Molinsky.

And this is Tim Lapetino. He's a graphic designer in Chicago, and he runs a website called the museum of video game art.

TL: My Dad brought home our first Atari in 1983, we busted it open and it was magical the idea you could play games on TV, and I remember one of the very first things I looked at were boxes, make sense of the idea of what I was seeing on screen related what was on box I wanted to save those, line those up, line up on shelf, my Dad was like why keep those? Keep cartridges? Like keeping box for refrigerator. And you're 5, you're like okay. But I spent hundred of dollars rebuying them as an adult.

In fact, Tim just put out a book called The Art of Atari. It's got interviews with designers and executives – plus a lot of eye candy for anyone who loved those games in the '80s – especially the box illustrations, which looked like the covers of fantasy novels from the '70s and '80s. There was so much stuff going on in these illustrations, you had to gaze at them for a long time to catch every little detail. But Tim says this book isn't a nostalgia trip.

TL: This art and design is really worth visiting because deserves to be up there with great design of 20th century.

I learned things about Atari that completely surprised me.

First of all, the company was founded much earlier than I realized. The visionaries behind it, Nolan Bushnell and Ted Dabney started collaborating in 1968. Their big breakthrough, Pong, came out in 1972. The home console version was in stores just two years later. Everything was going great for them -- except every time they released a new game for the home division, it came in a completely new console.

TL: They released Stunt Cycle and Video Pinball and then multiple pong -- super pong, ultra pong, crazy pong.

Soon you've got a pile of consoles in your living room. They needed to invent something like an 8-track player for video games. We take this for granted now, but they were inventing video games from scratch.

TL: It's funny think about the idea that in the early documentation, it said this will not hurt your TV, this console will not ruin TV, were kids going to turn into vegetables?

That's where Atari turned to product designers, like Barney Huang.

BH: Our design goal was to make it look sophisticated and what we looked at, we look at Bang and Olfson, had sophisticated out of the box thinking design and what they did, they took normal control you see on stereo so confusing and hid it and made it very simple, and one of the things was to design it that's cool I just want to buy it.
To have it as center piece in living room?
BH: Yeah!

They had to wrestle with basic question like:

BH: Where do you plug in controller? In the past you plug it in back because easy made PC board, then you have cable wrap around. How long should the cable be from the console to controller? Should it be 3 feet? 6 feet? When people play with it, sitting on coach table there so three feet max.

The other big issue they had to deal with is something that Tim calls "The Imagination Gap." The graphics were crude, often just rectangles, and blips on a screen. If you were given these games with no information, you might not know what this world is supposed to be.

TL: There was very little advertising, occasionally see commercial on TV or print ad, we also didn't have this subculture of video games, with magazines, reviews, all that came later, early on with Atari 2600 the first time encountered game was going to be on a store shelf.

That's why the box covers were so elaborate. Most of the illustrations were done in a montage style, like an Indiana Jones poster. That way, an illustrator could cram a lot of story into one image.

TL: So in something like Super Break Out, you have this astronaut head, rainbow reflected in curve of his element but rainbow bricks behind him.

Or take Checkers.

TL: You've got this guy at a table playing checkers, he's got this woman playing on his arm, there's a castle in distance, even if suggestion of story some family affair, some issue and challenge, majestic sunset, it's still checkers!

SH: For Checkers for instance, I wanted to try to develop backstory even though there wasn't really a backstory.

Steve Hendricks drew many of those covers.

He says they were never embarrassed by the video game graphics, which were super high tech for the time. But they understand a lot of extra work needed to be done to draw in the players. They even went to town on the game manuals.

SH: It was a lot of fun. The Warlords was one I had so much fun with because Jim Heather who developed the game, he had this backstory so we created illustrations from manual, father and four warring sons, fighting each other and the father was so upset. (Laughs it really made it a lot of fun.

They were all following the vision of George Opperman. He designed the Atari logo and that friendly round font. He preferred the montage style of illustration. And he was fond of banded rainbow colors, which also became associated with the brand. This is him from an industrial film.

CLIP

Again, Barney Huang.

BH: He loved what he did. He was chain smoker, 40 gallons of coffee a day,

SH: You know the time he spent there was over and above, and you know he never bragged about it, he never lamented it, he just love it! He'd be there in weekends, Saturday and Sunday.

BH: He died one day on his drawing board over the weekend. They found him Monday morning or Sunday night, the janitor. He died of a heart attack, oh my God.
There's some line in the book that he was a true believer, who gave his life to the company.
BH; Oh yeah, he gave his life to the company, gave his life. He died on the drawing board.

In a moment, the darling of Silicon Valley blows up into a million pixels – or more like a hundred pixels. It's still the '80s.

BREAK

I talked with a lot of designers about Atari. And they all said the same thing:

SH: It was the best place I think I've ever worked.

Steve Hendricks says Atari was the first company to create the kind of work environment we think of as Silicon Valley today.

SH: I think Atari was the leader when it came to employee benefits and perks, you know we had a gym, because we'd play ping pong during break.

BH: You could wear sandals, today no big dig deal; but you could have long hair.

On top of that it was, well, the '70s.

BH: We were having parties you couldn't believe, we had name bands, back then we had Santana one time. Who does that?! There were a lot of divorces, a lot of affairs.

Tim Lapetino.

TL: These are 20 somethings, why sit in boardroom when sit in hot tub? This is the Bay Area, drugs are being done, it was a creative freewheeling culture, there wasn't job description people molded to fit company, pull people in from disparate places, there was no such thing as game designer.
You don't put ad out for game designer, they didn't exist yet. They were creating them.
TL: Right, absolutely you had interesting personalizes, maybe people would might not fit in somewhere else, some guys were brilliant but you know what comes with brilliance is a bit of weirdness and Atari embraced it, they couldn't afford not to because they were growing so fast, they were strapped to the rocket and they were trying to make things happen and get everything done, it was a pretty wild ride.

The company was growing at record speed, but it was still small enough to feel like a family. The head honchos were just down the hall, always willing

to hang out with programmers. But that started to change when Warner Brothers bought Atari in 1976.

TL: But after Warner came in. Warner brought money, they brought experience in marketing, there were a lot of good things they did after WB bought the company golden age of Atari, but they also brought corporate structure, people came in didn't know anything about era of videogames, they came from textiles, people selling deodorant started causing culture clash.

Steve Hendricks and Barney Huang got disillusioned. It wasn't just the corporate structure – and suddenly having men in suits to answer to. Atari had gone from a revolutionary company to a company that just wanted to keep the status quo going.

SH: It struck me that they weren't interested in doing any new products The 2600 was going so great, why mess with success?

BH: As people started to play games, I got it, I want something more. You had to have the creative process, how make it challenging? Sometimes doing same thing over and over, there's that creativity block.
Seemed like creativity in abundance, why did creativity unable to think outside box?
BH: It was the bonus program, Eric if you develop this your game, get this bonus, money driving this thing.

The other problem -- a lot of money was flooding into the company, and it was mostly going to the top.

TL: These programmers didn't feel appreciated, they started feeling used. Atari became fastest growing company in US history and these guys and girls don't have credits on games, names are not on boxes, they're not compensated sales of game, and several programmers it would be fair to institute bonus system, look at how much money making.

BH: They felt they should be compensated creating revenue, So it's like hey, this game is selling a bazillion of them, I should make a little something out of this.

Which rubbed Barney the wrong way. He felt like they were all chipping in to create this overall experience for players and help cross the imagination gap.

BH: So that happened, unfortunately. There was a lot of greed, it was just greed.

TL: Atari management did not respond well, you start seeing groups of programmers leaving Atari and starting first third party video game creators, a set of guys left and created Activism, they still around today,

TL: There are stories guys at Activism after Atari wouldn't fly same plane as vice president and present, they wanted some of them to survive, there was definitely a lot of ego going on here.

They also were creating non-Atari games for the Atari system. Some of them were great like Pitfall, which was my favorite game as a kid.

TL: And Atari is livid, sue them seven ways to Sunday, tried to get them to shut down, eventually courts ruled in Activism's favor create games for these systems, no monopoly that opened door for some of the downfall of Atari once one company making software for super popular system sold millions, now all these other companies get piece of that pie, and as the years went on, glut of games not good.

Although Atari put out its share of duds – like the infamous E.T. game that was so bad, the unsold cartridges were dumped in a landfill.

But this was news to me:

TL: Towards end had small fly by night companies creating X-rated games for 2600, Atari didn't want anything to do but here it was, those games on selves, competing against them giving them a bad name.

When Tim told me this, I was completely shocked. So I went online to check out these games, there are videos on them YouTube. Some of the games were hilariously naughty, but some of them were just outright horrifying.

TL: One of the more infamous Custer's Revenge, it involves, it's absolutely terrible, involves, you're a naked Custer trying to avoid arrows and you've got native American woman tied to stake and the goal is for you to have your way with her.

By 1985, the video game industry had imploded. Atari was sold over and over again, trying to reboot itself each time, but the company was a ghost of its former self.

Japanese companies filled the void with Nintendo, Sega, PlayStation – and they dominated for a long time because they figured out a way to have full control over the games you could play on their systems.

And while the graphics of video games have gotten much better, they were all still following the model Atari created when it basically invented this industry.

The other thing that hasn't changed – they're still trying to close the imagination gap as we keep demanding more and more. Virtual Reality is supposed to be the next breakthrough. There's no console, no hand-held controllers. There isn't three-foot gap between you and the video game console. But some day people will look back at VR, and think wow, people in 2017 really had to use their imaginations to believe in those worlds.

That's it for this week, thank you for listening. Special thanks to Tim Lapetino, Steve Hendricks and Barney Huang.

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