

The man who made 'the worst video game in history'.

Name _____ Date _____

By Richard Hooper BBC World Service

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The video game of Steven Spielberg's ET is considered to be one of the worst of all time and has even been blamed for triggering the collapse of Atari. Howard Scott Warshaw, the gifted programmer who made it, explains how it was rushed out in a matter of weeks - and how he feels about those events in California now.

It was July 1982 and Atari, then one of the world's most successful tech companies, had just paid a reported \$21m for the video game rights to Spielberg's new blockbuster, ET the Extra-Terrestrial.

Howard Scott Warshaw was the programmer asked to design the game. He had just finished the video game of Spielberg's Raiders of the Lost Ark and Spielberg considered the then twenty-four year old a "certifiable genius".

Games for the Atari 2600 were distributed on cartridges that took months to design and manufacture but, so that ET would be in the shops for Christmas, Warshaw was asked to complete the game in just five weeks.



Warshaw's idea for the game was that the player had to help ET 'phone home' by collecting components to make an inter-planetary telephone. The player would have to dodge government agents and scientists in order to complete the mission. He travelled from the Atari headquarters in Sunnyvale, California to Los Angeles to present his pitch to Spielberg.

Atari needed ET to be a hit. In 1982 sales had reached a peak of \$2bn but the company was losing market share to home computers like the Commodore 64, which could do more than play games.

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Atari ordered an initial run of four million copies and budgeted a reported \$5m on what would be, at the time, the biggest-ever advertising campaign for a video game.

Although, to begin with, the game was "right up there on the Billboard top sellers" sales soon fell.

Players complained that the ET character would inexplicably fall into pits and get stuck. As one 10-year-old told The New York Times: "It wasn't fun."

Atari realised that ET was not going home. In early December 1982 it announced "disappointing" sales for the year and by the summer of 1983 Atari's parent company announced losses of \$310m. A year later, in 1984, Atari was sold and many of the workforce made redundant. Atari just couldn't compete as consumers turned to the home computer and the market was saturated with video games.



"Things just started to unravel," says Warshaw. "It's awesome to be credited with single-handedly bringing down a billion-dollar industry with eight kilobytes of code. But the truth is a little more complex."



"I took some time off to recover from the whole experience," says Warshaw. "I went into real estate for a couple of years and hated it". Eventually, in 2008, after returning to work in the video games industry and later working in TV, but still finding himself unhappy, Warshaw retrained as a psychotherapist.

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Reading Task A

1. In 1982 Atari was famous for being what?

2. How old was Howard Warshaw when he was asked to design a game version of ET?

3. Why do you think Steven Spielberg asked Howard Warshaw to design the ET game? What do we know about Spielberg's opinion of Warshaw? (2 marks)

4. How many weeks was Warshaw given to complete his design of the ET game? Why? (2 marks)

5. Warshaw flew to Los Angeles to meet Spielberg. What is meant by the term 'present his pitch'?

6. Why did Atari need the ET game to be a 'big hit'?

7. What was the advertising budget for the ET game?

8. What were the main complaints about the game? (2 marks)

9. What does the phrase 'Atari realised ET was not going home' convey?

10. What were the main reasons for the collapse of Atari, as reported in the article?

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Speaking, Listening and Communication Task A

In April 2014 Warshaw was given his own chance to obtain closure on the ET fiasco. A film company was making a documentary about a legend that had persisted for 30 years - that in 1983 Atari had buried truckloads of the unsold ET games in the New Mexico desert.

"I never believed it; I just thought it was absurd," says Warshaw.

Watch the video clip: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NH XK2mKtu20>



Discussion

Why were people so interested in visiting the land-fill site in the desert?

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Reading Task B



The city of Alamogordo granted permission for a public excavation to take place. Warshaw was invited to attend.

"When we arrived, there was a long, long line of fans from all over the country who had travelled to see this," he says. "It was an odd thing to sit there and literally watch your past being dug up."

The excavation confirmed that Atari products were indeed buried at the dump and Warshaw was filmed at the moment a battered and crushed copy of ET was pulled from the ground.

"I became extremely emotional," he says. "This little game that I had written in five weeks more than 30 years ago was still generating excitement. I was full of gratitude.

"Is ET really the worst game of all time? Probably not. But the story of the fall of the video game industry needed a face and that was ET.

"I actually prefer it when people do identify it as the worst game of all time because I also did Yars Revenge and that's frequently identified as one of the best of all time. So between the two, I have the greatest range of any designer in history!"

a) What can you infer from the phrase 'obtain closure' on page 4?

b) *Is ET really the worst game of all time? Probably not. But the story of the fall of the video game industry needed a face and that was ET.*

What language device is used in the paragraph above?

1. Rhetorical question
2. Alliteration
3. Simile

c) What is the main purpose of the BBC article? Select an example from the text to support your answer.

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d) Identify at least two presentational features in the advertising poster shown above.

Explain why each feature is effective.

e) Identify an example of **direct address** in the poster.

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Writing Task A

What do you consider to be the best – or worst – video game you have played?

Write a review for a magazine article. Remember to check your work for punctuation and grammar. Your writing should include paragraphs, a range of different sentence types, and be presented in a logical order.

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Curriculum mapping and answers

Functional Skills L1-L2 English mapping

Coverage and range statements provide an indication of the type of content candidates are expected to apply in functional contexts. Relevant content can also be drawn from equivalent (school) National Curriculum levels and the Adult Literacy standards.

✓ indicates the main coverage and range skills that are (or can be) covered in this resource. However, these will vary with the student group and how the resource is used by the teacher. **Reference:** Ofqual (2009), *Functional Skills criteria for English: Entry 1, Entry 2, Entry 3, level 1 and level 2*. <http://www.ofqual.gov.uk/>

Level 1 Reading **Skill standard (SS):** Read and understand a range of straightforward texts

Coverage and range statements

- a) Identify the main points and ideas and how they are presented in a variety of texts ✓ Bd, Be.
- b) Read and understand texts in detail ✓ A2, A4, A7, A8, A10.
- c) Utilise information contained in texts
- d) Identify suitable responses to texts

Level 1 Writing **(SS):** Write a range of texts to communicate information, ideas and opinions, using formats and styles suitable for their purpose and audience

- a) Write clearly and coherently, including an appropriate level of detail ✓
- b) Present information in a logical sequence ✓
- c) Use language, format and structure suitable for purpose and audience ✓
- d) Use correct grammar, including correct and consistent use of tense ✓
- e) Ensure written work includes generally accurate punctuation / spelling & that meaning is clear ✓

Level 1 Speaking, Listening and Communication **(SS):** Take full part in formal and informal discussions and exchanges that include unfamiliar subjects

- a) Make relevant and extended contributions to discussions, allowing for and responding to others' input ✓
- b) Prepare for and contribute to the formal discussion of ideas and opinions ✓
- c) Make different kinds of contributions to discussions ✓
- f) Present information/points of view clearly and in appropriate language ✓

Level 2 Reading **(SS):** Select, read, understand and compare texts and use them to gather information, ideas, arguments and opinions

- a) Select and use different types of texts to obtain and utilise relevant information ✓ A1, A6.
- b) Read and summarise, succinctly, information/ideas from different sources
- c) Identify the purposes of texts and comment on how meaning is conveyed ✓ Bc
- d) Detect point of view, implicit meaning and/or bias ✓ A3, A5, A9, Ba.
- e) Analyse texts in relation to audience needs and consider suitable responses ✓ Bb, Bd, Be.

Level 2 Writing **(SS):** Write a range of texts, including extended written documents, communicating information, ideas and opinions, effectively and persuasively

- a) Present information on complex subjects clearly and concisely ✓
- b) Present information/ideas concisely, logically, and persuasively ✓
- c) Use a range of writing styles for different purposes ✓
- d) Use a range of sentence structures, including complex sentences, and paragraphs to organise written communication effectively ✓
- e) Punctuate written text using commas, apostrophes and inverted commas accurately ✓
- f) Ensure written work is fit for purpose and audience, with accurate spelling and grammar that supports clear meaning ✓

Level 2 Speaking, Listening and Communication **(SS):** Make a range of contributions to discussions in a range of contexts, including those that are unfamiliar, and make effective presentations

- a) Consider complex information and give a relevant, cogent response in appropriate language ✓
- b) Present information and ideas clearly and persuasively to others ✓
- c) Adapt contributions to suit audience, purpose and situation ✓
- d) Make significant contributions to discussions, taking a range of roles and helping to move discussion forward ✓

* This resource also covers many adult literacy curriculum <http://www.excellencegateway.org.uk/content/etf1286> elements.

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Curriculum mapping and answers

NOTE: some answers are merely suggestions or examples and others may well be possible. Check with your tutor.

Reading Task A

1. In 1982 Atari was famous for being what? **One of the world's most successful technical companies.**
2. How old was Howard Warshaw when he was asked to design a game version of ET? **24**
3. Why do you think Steven Spielberg asked Howard Warshaw to design the ET game? **Warshaw had already written a video game of Spielberg's Raiders of the Lost Ark. What do we know about Spielberg's opinion of Warshaw? Thought very highly of him. Called him a "certifiable genius".**
4. How many weeks was Warshaw given to complete his design of the ET game? **5 weeks.**
Why? **So it was finished in time to be in the shops for Christmas.**
5. Warshaw flew to Los Angeles to meet Spielberg. What is meant by the term 'present his pitch'? **To explain (to Spielberg) his ideas for the game, and persuade Spielberg to give him the writing job.**
6. Why did Atari need the ET game to be a 'big hit'? **Atari was losing the market share (sales) to other manufacturers of other home computers such as the Commodore 64.**
7. What was the advertising budget for the ET game? **5 million dollars.**
8. What were the main complaints about the game? **It wasn't fun / the ET character kept getting stuck.**
9. What does the phrase 'Atari realised ET was not going home' convey? **The story/affair/event was not going to end happily.**
10. What were the main reasons for the collapse of Atari, as reported in the article? **Low sales / millions of dollars of losses (losing money).**

Reading Task B

- a) What can you infer from the phrase 'obtain closure' on page 4?
That Warshaw's unhappiness, caused by the lack of success of the game, ended after the documentary was made. That he finally came to terms with it all.
- b) '*Is ET really the worst game of all time?*' is a rhetorical question (i.e. a question used to make a point rather than to prompt an answer).
- c) What is the main purpose of the BBC article? **To inform. There are many sentences / clauses in the text to support this. For example: Howard Scott Warshaw was the programmer asked to design the game / A year later, in 1984, Atari was sold and many of the workforce made redundant / etc., etc.**
At Level 1 you may want to accept 'to tell' as a substitute for 'to inform'.
Accept 'explain' as the purpose if the learner's accompanying example from the text supports this correctly. For example, some of Warshaw's quotes explain certain points. You may want to accept both purposes (at Level 2 learners are expected to recognise that a text can have more than one purpose).
- d) Identify at least two presentational features in the advertising poster shown above. Explain why each feature is effective.
Large (coloured) title – tells you what the poster is about. / Large image of ET – attracts reader's attention, adds appeal or interest. / Bright yellow font – makes phone number (or the Save \$5 offer) stand out. / Bold text within voucher image draws attention to the \$5 off offer.
- e) Identify an example of **direct address** in the poster. **E.T needs your help! / - and that's you / E.T and you have plenty of problems to overcome ... / we can ship the hottest new games to you faster / you'll be one of the first to ... / when you order from the Club!**