

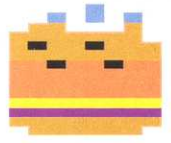
The most successful game machine of the '70s and early '80s kicked off the triumphant era of 'programmable' cartridge consoles. Atari became synonymous with video games.

# Atari VCS

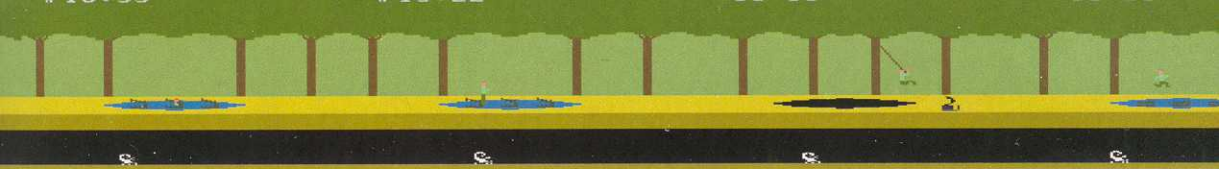
USA, 1977

Units sold:	30 Million
Number of games:	500
Game storage:	Cartridge, Tape
Games developed until:	1992

★★★☆☆



Clear design, simple control and 500 games: The first VCS featured wood imitation on the front panel.



The Atari VCS represented the biggest step in the history of electronic games. Introduced in 1977, it superseded Atari's (and roughly a dozen other competitors') Pong consoles and made use of exchangeable cartridges, founding a billion dollar industry in the process.

In spite of some tough competition, the 'Video Computer System' became synonymous with videogames. In the early '80s, every teenager and all young families wanted to own an Atari.

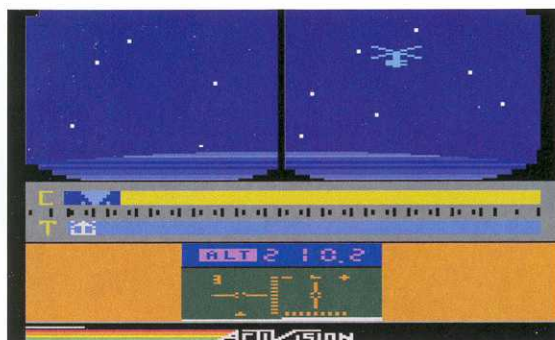
But the VCS initially experienced a slow start and even Atari failed to see the potential of its exchangeable ROM games. Fairchild, RCA and Magnavox/Phillips were also marketing 'programmable consoles', but Atari, with its well-known brand of arcade games and strong design team, was in pole position. The breakthrough came when the company extended the choice of games by adding VCS conversions of Japanese arcade games – in particular Taito's hit **Space Invaders**. Halfway through 1981, this arcade conversion had already sold more than a million copies.

All Atari games were developed by Atari itself – until the programmers wanted more money and credit: In 1980, a team of developers left Atari and founded Activision, led by marketing pro Jim Levy. Atari was not amused seeing their in-house stars David Crane, Larry Kaplan and Alan Miller walk out, but it wasn't long before it became clear that independent development companies rejuvenated the industry. Following the creation of Activision other 'third-parties' were founded. Apart from more Atari deserters

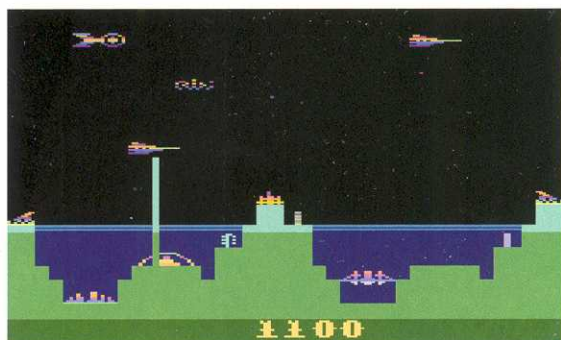
(such as Rob Fulop who co-founded Imagic), traditional toy manufacturers began producing VCS cartridges. Monopoly maker Parker licensed and converted Japanese games by Konami and Nintendo as well as prominent movie and comic brands (**Star Wars**, **James Bond**). Competitor Tiger had to stick to lesser known arcade machines from Taito and Orca, also producing VCS versions of computer games by Sierra Online.

The broad spectrum of games and world wide brand awareness left Atari's competition without a chance. In 1980, the Intellivision was introduced and 1982 the Colecovision. Despite advanced technology and several million buyers, both left only a scratch on Atari's market share. The two competitors were forced to bow before Atari's success and began humbly converting their own games for the VCS. Then, smaller companies, often new to the video game market, joined the industry. In 1982, the market witnessed twice as many new game releases as in all the years before. Gamers' trust diminished in the face of quickly put together and primitive games.

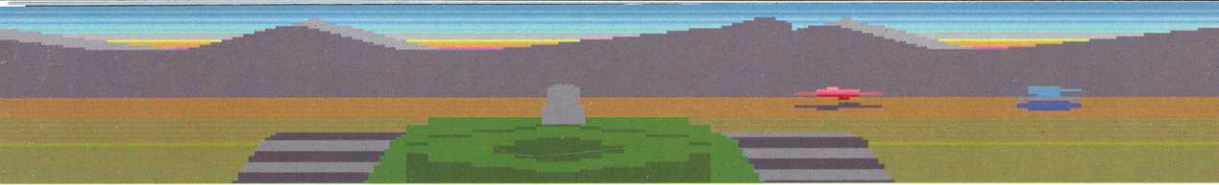
Whilst third-parties repeated old formulas again and again, without introducing any innovation, the price for new cartridges dropped to ten dollars. VCS development consequently became unprofitable, and an array of recently founded companies were forced to close down. In 1984, the Atari market was crushed under the weight of several million unsold games, taking down with it all other platforms. The industry had its first crash. In the west, it seemed as if the hobby had come to an end.



As the most complex cart, Steve Kitchen's Space Shuttle simulation utilized all control switches found on the console.



The Imagic logo stood for visually perfect, fine tuned VCS games: Atlantis from 1983.



In the time-span of eight years, only minor modifications were made to the case:  
In 1980, the two difficulty levers were moved to the machine's back...

By the time the 8-Bit market began to take off again, spearheaded by Nintendo, Atari's era of triumph was over. The VCS successors, the 5200 and 7800, both failed, and only the old-timer VCS remained on the shelves. In the early '90s, the final series was shipped.

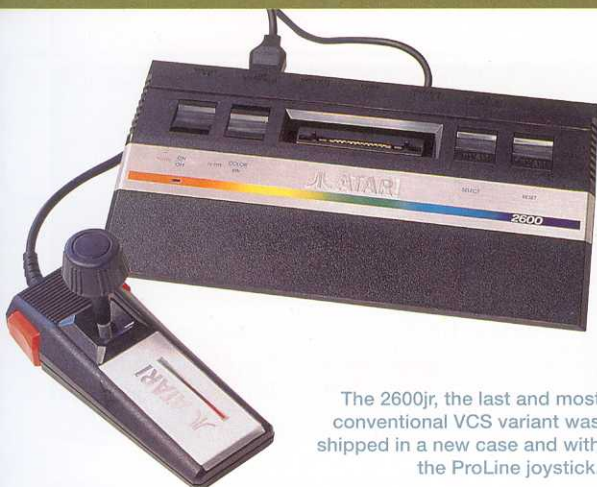
With an estimated 30 million sold units, the Atari VCS was and still is a worldwide classic. Collectors and retro fans look out for the first of four variants – the wood imitation on the front reflecting the taste of the '70s. Atari's joystick, included with every console until 1986, is legendary – consisting of a simple design with rubber clad stick and red fire button. Despite contacts wearing out, the

straightforward joystick is one of the best controllers of all time. Eight directions, fire: The minimal functionality was better suited to the mass-market than the complex controllers by Intellivision and Coleco.

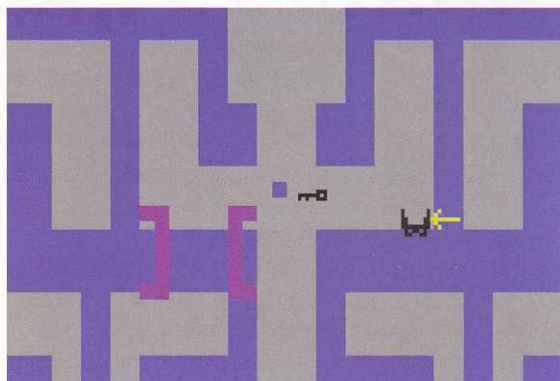
Atari itself shipped only the most important peripherals, making way for a flourishing add-on industry of deluxe joysticks with massive arcade technology or the clever feet-controlled Joyboard by a then little known company called Amiga. External keyboards and BASIC cartridges upgraded the console to a home computer, ROM jukeboxes like the Videoplexer or Game Selex helped gamers to organize their collection; even copying systems were sold in Europe.



...in 1982, Atari gave up the wood-look and produced the successful console entirely in black.



The 2600jr, the last and most conventional VCS variant was shipped in a new case and with the ProLine joystick.



Fantasy journey via joystick: Adventure (1978).

The most ambitious and interesting add-on was the Supercharger adapter, which gave the VCS' tiny 128 bytes of internal memory another 6 K and allowed the development of complex games on cheap audio tapes. Later, the engineers behind the Supercharger turned into an in-house team of famous C64 publisher Epyx.

In 1983, the GameLine modem appeared, not for head-to-head action, but for software download. It wasn't a success but left behind it a legacy: While the video game market collapsed, the game distribution venture became C64 internet provider Quantum Link, which gave birth to the first online community Habitat. Quantum Link later changed its name to America Online (AOL).



Excellent action for two players: RealSports Tennis (1983).

## Atari VCS variants and successors

<b>Atari VCS 2600</b>	<b>1977</b>	The first version with rustic planks on the front and three toggle switches to the left and right of the cartridge port (power, colour, left and right difficulty level, select and reset) retailed for \$200 and shipped with two joysticks and Combat cartridge. The six-switch version was sold world wide, in the US also by Sears (under the name of Telegames Arcade), in Japan by Epoch. The Epoch Cassette TV Game was released in October 1979 for an audacious 57,300 yen.
<b>Atari VCS 2600A</b>	<b>1980</b>	The new version retained the wooden look, but had only four toggle switches to the left and right of the cartridge port. The two other switches were moved to the back of the machine – bad for games like Space Shuttle, which used all switches for additional functionality. Also sold as Sears Telegames Arcade.
<b>Atari 2600</b>	<b>1982</b>	Features a black case with four toggle switches. Identical to the 2600A, apart from the colour and dropped wood look. The console retailed for \$100, available either with two games and joysticks, or with just one game and joystick.
<b>Atari 2800</b>	<b>1983</b>	Sold for 24,800 yen from May 1983, this was the Japanese version of the VCS 2600 with six toggle buttons, a modified case and new controllers. Apart from that and the logo, it was externally identical to the US licensed Sears Telegames Arcade II.
<b>Atari 2600jr</b>	<b>1986</b>	The last version sold for below \$50 in an overhauled and compact case and with new joysticks. The machine stayed on the shelves as a low budget alternative to Nintendo and Sega right until the '90s.