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Atari: Game Over

By Unknown

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Alamogordo New Mexico.

A small town, about

30,000 people

but it seems to attract
more than its fair share
of strange occurrences.

It's right around the
corner from where they
tested the first atomic bomb.

It's also the grave site of
Ham, the first chimpanzee...

and really, the first
American... to go into space.

And it's the place where
this guy broke the land
speed record in a rocket sled.

Which is cool, but
also kind of strange.

Despite all of this, the
thing that Alamogordo is
best known for is its landfill.

The dump.

Because supposedly, that's
where Atari buried E.T.,
the worst video game
of all time.

It's been described
as the worst video game ever.

E.T. for Atari.

Today we're going to talk
about the worst of the worst.

Here's our top 10
worst games ever.

E.T., the Extra Terrestrial?

Now here's the thing
about E.T.,

it's widely regarded as the
worst video game of all time.

WORST GAME EVER!

We have this myth,
or this legend of something
that happened 40 years ago.

Do do...

do do do do do do.
Son of a bitch, get out
of the fucking hole!
If you grab a
piece of the phone,
the FBI agent keeps
attacking you.
And if you take a
step in any direction,
you fall into a hole.
And if you get out of the
hole, you fall right back down!
One of the
major design flaws of the games
was that E.T. fell into pits.
Dammit!
Shit!
Oh, come on!
And guess what?
It now lives out it's
days in a landfill.
It's rumored that decades
ago, truckloads of that game
were dumped in the
Alamogordo landfill.
The idea that they had
so many of these things,
and they were so unable to sell
them, give them away, whatever,
they literally had
to drive them out
into the middle of the desert,
and bury them like a dead gangster.
It's almost too crazy
to be believed.
I think it's kind of silly.
Because it's urban legend.
It's just a great
story, I think.
I believe that this story
endures because the
adults just don't get it.
And that's satisfying
to the young people.

Whatever you look at
what the reasons are for it,
nothing makes sense.
What drove someone to need to
hide this stuff so intensely?
When I was five
years old, Pong came out.
And my dad got it for me
and my brother and sister.
When the Atari 2600 came out...
Atari!
...I got
every cartridge
I could get my hands on.
I played it constantly.
Atari was like Xbox and
PlayStation rolled into one.
It had an 80% market share, and
the 2600 was its killer app.
Adventure was probably my
favorite game on the 2600.
I spent three weeks
sitting in front
of my TV trying to find
the first Easter egg
ever hidden in a video game.
It looks kind of stupid now.
You were just a block, who
picked up an invisible dot,
and carried it into
the special room
to discover the
programmer's name.
But to me, finding that hidden
screen was like a revelation.
As an adult, I still play
a lot of video games.
But I also write and direct
movies, that's my job.
I've worked on a lot
of big comic book movies
the kind they make
shitty video games out of.
And I even wrote some of

the shitty video games.
But I'm also fascinated by
myths and urban legends.
In fact, 10 years ago, me
and this guy Werner Herzog
went to Scotland to find
the Loch Ness Monster.
We never did find
Nessie, but I still
love an adventure, especially
to unravel an urban legend.
Today, video games
are everywhere,
so it might be hard to
understand my generation's
obsession with Atari.
But for us, it was the gateway
drug to a lifelong addiction
to video games.
And then one day
it was just gone.
Sometime in the mid '80s,
it just disappeared.
And there were no
more Atari games.
And I always wondered
what happened.
Where did it go?
So, this is the famous landfill?
Yeah.
The burial... the final
resting ground of E.T.?
Yeah, this is the place.
This road here, this gate, this
is exactly the way the Ataris
would have came through.
Through that ditch,
and up through here.
This was the only access in.
Back in those days, it
was just pure desert.
And is there any way
to get through this,
or are we, I mean...

Well, yeah, it's a
high security gate.

Just duck under.

Yeah, I guess that works.

Heh, heh, heh.

Joe Lewandowski's
been the garbage guru, if you
will, for a number of years.

He operated various
waste disposal companies
within Alamogordo
and Otero county.

And when it comes to
the Atari graveyard,
I believe he probably
has more direct knowledge
of anybody else.

Joe's the guy that's
advising the city,
and telling the city
where everything is.

And I think that he's the only
guy that might be able to walk
out to that dump, and point to
a spot on the ground, and say,
this is where it's at.

So, so this whole area,
this is where it's buried?
Some people don't believe
it's there, but trust me,
it's there.

You can kind of feel it.

Right?

It that just me?

Ah, that's pretty much you.

It's just me.

So what are these
little boxes, here?

Each one of those boxes
represents where garbage is.

I see.

Someone would write
down, oh, that's
where we put the Atari trash.

That's where we put, you know.
That's the problem.
Nobody did.
We do today.
So it's looking for... it's
like looking for a haystack
in a pile of haystacks.
Pretty much.
And then looking for the
needle inside that haystack.
And find the needle.
So it's two levels.
This picture here
is actually out of an old
El Paso Times article.
This is actually that
day, and that event,
when it actually occurred.
So what we did, is
just to figure out,
OK, if this reporter
took this picture here,
then the reporter
had to be standing
somewhere in this area.
So here's the two cells that
we've pinned it down to, now.
So when you come
back here, and put
the reporter taking the
picture, and you make that line.
And what you're looking for,
is to make sure the line
intersects with the buildings.
Joe Lewandowski
wasn't just a guy
who knew his way around a dump.
He was also an
amateur archaeologist,
kind of like Indiana
Jones, but without the gun.
Or the whip.
See, the newspaper photo
was like the medallion,

and Joe had used it to
construct his own version
of the Staff of Ra.
And that pinpointed the
location of the Atari
dump, which is exactly how
Indy would have done it.
Joe was clearly obsessed.
He believed in the legend.
He'd spent over three
years constructing
a plan to dig up the landfill,
and prove it to the world.
But he wasn't a gamer.
He wasn't trying
to find out why.
And that's what
I wanted to know.
Why would the company I loved so
much decide to bury its future?
The whole E.T. story is a very
small part of the Atari story.
Let me go back and let me
explain how Atari started out.
The video game
came because of the convergence
of me working in an
amusement park summers,
while pursuing an
engineering degree
at the University of Utah.
I knew the economics of the
coin operated game business.
They made a lot of money.
Nolan designed
these incredibly elegant
circuits.
Put together in a way that's
so clever that modern engineers
have a hard time, you
know, understanding
and repairing these things.
My partner and I,
Ted Dabney, started

working on a ping-pong game.
By the end of '72,
we did \$3.5 million dollars.
And then we did \$19 million.
Then we did \$35 million.
It was a hockey stick.
This electronic medium,
which was just beginning,
had some traction with people.
And once you played some of the
more sophisticated arcade games
of the day, and understood
that maybe there
was a chance you could
duplicate that in a home game,
your eyes got big.
Home video games
have been a success
from the moment a
company called Atari
launched this basic game, Pong.
Which has been imitated by at
least 40 other manufacturers.
They're selling like crazy.
300,000 last year.
This year, three million.
Next year, six,
maybe 10 million.
We felt, well, maybe
this is a time to sell
to a company with deep pockets.
I was in my office
at Warner in 1976.
The phone rang, and it was
a guy named Gordy Crawford,
and he asked the question
I've never forgotten.
Would you guys be interested in
acquiring a technology based,
fast growing
And I said yes.
I didn't know what I said
yes to, but I said yes.
And that led to my

introduction to Atari.
Atari, where
the future comes from.
What excited
me about Atari wasn't Pong,
it was the chipset that
led to the Atari 2600.
Pong was sort of OK, you banged
up and back, and up and back.
But this meant you could
constantly change the games.
And that was a
very exciting idea.
We introduced the 2600
in 1977
with nine cartridges.
The home video game was a
very close approximation
of the coin-op experience.
It changed
the mindset of the world.
Turning the television
from a passive medium into
an active medium, that
was what we knew we were doing.
And that was super exciting to
be the pioneers in that field.
It just blew people away.
Nobody knew any this stuff.
They made it up as they went.
And they were good at it.
And it started everything.
It was playing
those games that taught people
the potential of a computer.
Atari,
at some level,
brought the computer revolution.
They
started experimentally
hiring smart kids, with this
idea that maybe they can
come up with other stuff to do.
And they inadvertently

were trying to create
the job of game designer.
Microprocessor real
time control programming
is just where it's at.
So, there's two kinds of
things you typically do
with that in the early 1980s.
You can do missile
guidance systems...
or like we say, kill
people for 12 cents a head.
Or you could make
video games, which
I thought was a much
better application
for the whole thing.
What went on at
Atari from the very beginning
was, basically, that
the engineers are
going to drive this company.
Because they weren't
just engineers.
They were creative guys.
They're like musicians,
or movie directors.
They're artists.
Through
luck, or providence, or both,
they ended up with this
department of game designers
that became this
dream team at Atari.
These guys who made all of
these classics... Tempest,
and Asteroids, and Centipede,
and Gauntlet, and, you know,
think of a game.
The
culture was these guys
do what they want to do.
One day, I was standing in
the men's room, at a urinal,

and I looked down, and I saw a pair of bare feet next to me. And I look, and here is a guy wearing a pair of shorts, and nothing else. And I said something. And they said, oh yeah, that's so and so. He's a great engineer. He doesn't like to wear clothes. The coin-op engineers at Atari, they were great. And on the consumer side, Howard was one of the best programmers. He was one of the best of those engineers. At the heart of the creative process is the programmer. I try to create, basically, a sensory experience that evokes a certain feeling in the user. I mean, I tend to program from a concept. I mean, it was... I was made for this. I mean, was is what I was made to do. January 11, 1981, I showed up for my first day of work as a game programmer at Atari. So, do you remember the first day you showed up here? Absolutely. My first office mates were Tod Frye and Rob Zdybel. And I had an understanding that there was a lot of dope that was smoked at Atari, when we were there. And so on my first day at work, I brought a joint, because I

didn't want to be, you know...

Yeah.

I wanted to be a courteous
guest, and so I showed up...

Which by the way,

this is a good lesson
for our younger viewers.

If people are doing drugs,
bring your own, so you fit in.

Tod walks

in, shuts the door, and says,

I'm going to get high

in here, so if you

don't want to be around

this, you'd better leave.

No, actually, here, I said.

I brought a joint.

And he sort of looked

at me and he went pbtt.

I'm going to smoke real stuff.

OK?

That was my introduction.

That was my first day at work.

We wanted

people who worked hard, and yet
had fun at doing it.

How do we mix up, so that

we don't know the difference

between our work and our play?

The company's motto was,

we take fun seriously.

But we used to say, we

take fun intravenously.

And they didn't

like that very much.

No, I don't know why.

The party atmosphere

was actually

calculated plan to incentivize.

I would set quotas.

If the quotas were met,

I'd throw a kegger.

They

would just roll out in the car,

go to a liquor store,
and they gave someone
a company credit
card, and they came
back with a bunch of booze.
And we consumed it.
Over there is where
the hot tub was.
Inside, on the first floor,
there's some great stuff
that went on in that room.
Over here, here's the
hill that you know,
one day I was wearing
a dashiki shirt, which
I was very into back then.
And I would do
somersaults down the hill.
I might have had some cocktails
that afternoon, at that point.
Did you know that you were
entering this crazy party
atmosphere, that you'd be?
No.
Even though I was told I
was, I had no expectation
that it could really exist.
The
best recruiting tool
we could have for an
engineer, was to bring
him over to one of our parties.
Hey, What's happening, people?
Hey, how's it going?
What's happening?
And they
thought, hey, I'm a nerd.
There are girls here.
They're talking to me.
It's good.
That was the culture.
These guys are the
lifblood of the business,
and they do what

they want to do.
And that's fine.
In some ways,
things happened to
me over the course
of three and a half
years here, that made
the next 25 years really tough.
Because it
established a standard
of what professional life,
and life in general, could be.
And I never let
go of the thought
that my life could
still be this or better.
I just didn't know how to do it.
It's really intense for
me to come back here.
This is the first time I've
been back here in 30 years.
And this was the place
where I was introduced
to what life could be, for me.
What a working life could be.
What real creative
satisfaction could be.
What doing something
really meaningful could be.
Those are all things that come
back to me in this moment.
And it's just...
it's very intense.
So what really
happened back in 1983?
People heard the
rumors, but Atari denied
the dump ever took place.
And eventually, people
forgot about it.
But with the growth
of the internet,
and all of its best and worst
lists, E.T. and its burial

went from small town gossip
to full blown urban legend.
By the mid '90s, videos begin
to appear online that seemed
to suggest that anyone with a
shovel go out in the desert,
and dig up the buried games.
That's what I thought too, but
it wasn't close to that easy.
Joe had spent years
researching the burial.
If his information
was correct, the games
were not only deep
underground, they
were covered with concrete.
Joe was still wading
through a sea of red tape.
But if and when the
city approved his plan
to excavate the landfill,
he was going to need
more than just a shovel.
He would need giant
yellow digging machines.
And a bunch of guys in hats
and vests to operate them.
This is one of the
photos of the actual burial,
when they did it.
So we're looking at, like, 15
feet down, to hit the concrete.
Under the concrete
is mostly dirt.
It's just the... it's
the bottom of the pit.
What's that thing,
right over there?
That's a motor grader.
A motor grader?
Yes.
That's for, really,
just fine grading.
You know, like the

highways and roads.
And fine planing large areas.
So, we conceivably might
need that, for this, right?
No.
No.
I mean, but you
might... you could
bring it out before, right?
I mean, you might want to
park it there so it's ready.
No, not really.
No.
We're fine.
I don't know.
Not my field.
I am
concerned that Joe's
moving kind of quick.
And we do need to throw some
brakes on, and slow it down.
The opposition comes
from environmentalists,
maybe within the community.
And the concern is
that Alamogordo also
may have something else
buried in the landfill that
may be hazardous.
And we may not know exactly
where this location is.
Nobody
really and truly
has had honest
records as to where
everything is buried out there.
And we're talking
potential mercury laced
pigs, malathion, possibly DDT.
There's potentially
lead in there,
and maybe some other
dangerous metals
that are in those cartridges.

I don't want to be in an area where we might crack open a sealed tomb, so to speak, of these hogs, where mercury the gas comes out. So I don't want the Stephen King novel of, we hit the wrong spot, and all of the sudden we are evacuating Alamogordo. That is unacceptable. If there's a problem that the New Mexico Environmental Department perceives, we're not going to be able to proceed. Until I'm satisfied it's safe, it's not going to happen. At least within my power. You know, there's only so much power that I have. So, for my first game, they wanted me to do a coin-op conversion. Although I had only been there for about a week, I went to my manager, and I said, you know something? I said this game, Star Castle, on the 2600 is just going to suck. I know it's going to suck. And I said, but I think I can take some of the key things that I think make it fun game, and re-work it so that it would work on the 2600. And so they said, OK, go ahead. Do what you want to do. So, how did you learn how to program a game? I just read the manual and started writing the game.

No one had ever done, like, a
backstory for a game before.
And I thought, this
is my first game,
and I want to be involved
in every part of it.
And I want to make it the best
thing it could possibly be.
So I wrote this, like,
seven, eight page story.
I stayed up all night
just writing this story.
Knocked it out.
And it was a science
fiction story
about flies that get on the
first interstellar spaceships,
and mutate, and evolve, and
take over the solar system.
But now they're under attack by
this other monster, and stuff.
And that's the short
version of the story.
So I thought, well,
I need to name it.
So what I did, was I named
it Yar, because that's
Ray spelled backwards.
And Ray Kassar was
the CEO of Atari.
Right?
So I've got his name
keyed into the title.
And I thought, revenge,
great action word.
You know, so that's compelling.
And so that's how it
became Yar's Revenge.
When Yar's Revenge
came out, it was a hit.
It was huge.
Games that could look
like Yar's Revenge
looked... that could draw

that kind of stuff...
were, like, magical.
Even though Yar's Revenge might
look primitive... you know,
it looks like a
superconducting super collider
compared to a lot
of the games that
were out there at the time.
I remember the first time
I put the cartridge in,
and I was like, what is this?
It really is a very innovative
shooter of that era.
Getting
a ship to fly around.
So it's fun just to
fly the ship around.
It was a trick, especially
on that hardware.
The enemy was cool and scary.
And it felt really
good to defeat it.
You feel like it's your victory
when you beat those challenges.
And you feel like it's your
defeat when they beat you.
And you keep coming
back, because you
didn't lose by being cheated.
You didn't lose because the
game did something unfair.
You lost because you
weren't quite good enough.
And all of the great games
sit right on that edge.
I remember playing
Yar's Revenge one day,
and we happened on
trick that let you...
if you were on this right spot
at the right time in the game,
and it was in between levels...
these initials came up.

And the initials were HSW.
To us, it was some
weird mystery.
And like, we had to
figure out what HSW meant.
And finally, in one
of the game magazines,
they published what HSW meant.
Turns out, HSW means
Howard Scott Warshaw,
the guy who made the game.
Yar's Revenge
was the first game
that Atari ever did, where
the programmer's name
went outwith the cartridge.
Yar's Revenge had
a lot of firsts,
and that was just one of them.
Yar's Revenge is
the bestselling original game
for the Atari 2600.
It sold something
like a million copies.
Every reviewer at
the time thought
Yar's Revenge was one of the
best games Atari put out.
You know it made a lot
of money for Atari.
In 1981,
this was a company
that made operating profits of
something like \$375 million.
One of today's greatest
marketing triumphs
in the entertainment
field is video games.
It was
beyond comprehension.
The fastest growing company
in American history.
This was an explosion.
Even those of us who

were in the middle of it
were shaking our heads, going,
oh my god, this is amazing.
We were the most
successful coin-op company,
we were the dominant
consumer company.
And we sat around literally
saying to ourselves,
what are the
categories of games?
What are the
capabilities of the 2600?
Where is this industry going?
Everything that Joe
has put together on this
Atari graveyard, so far,
seems to be coming true.
I'm in favor of the
Atari games being dug up,
because it is the largest
myth in the gaming world.
I believe that Joe
just thinks it would
be an outstanding
event for Alamogordo,
and a way to get us on the map.
On Tuesday,
Alamogordo's city commission
approved a deal to dig
in the old landfill
within the next six months.
The city
has given its OK,
and now the state has
given them approval.
Film crews will
be in Alamogordo.
The documentary
film crews will
start probing the dump for
their strange buried treasure

at 9:

So, this is an
impressive looking machine
out here.
What the hell is it doing?
What's this drilling rig does,
it goes down, straight down,
and takes out core
samples, and brings
up whatever's in the ground.
We've narrowed it down
from 300 acres down
to about 5 to 10 acres.
And so, What we're doing now is
trying to get it even closer.
We're looking for things
like somebody's mail...
you know, the postmarks...
newspapers, things like that.
Looking for dates.
We're looking for
September of '83.
Don't you think
people are going
to be disappointed
if we dig it up,
and we don't actually
find the E.T. games?
I mean, wouldn't that be?
That would be very
disappointing for all of us.
All the work.
Three years of work
put into this thing.
So what do we do then?
You're just going to dig up the
whole landfill, or something'?
No, we can't.
The environment department
will not allow that to happen.
You're saying that
there's a possibility
that this could turn out to
be a giant waste of time.
I think I've said it

before, I'll bet the car,
I won't bet the house.
Most everybody, at least
in the Western world,
has played a video
game of some kind.
They've gone to an arcade.
They know the Atari brand.
They certainly know E.T.
And so I think there's
a universal curiosity
about this game.
You know, something did happen
those couple of nights in 1983
that I think it merits
serious investigation.
So why did I
decide to go to Alamogordo?
I'm very much
interested in the impact
that a particular
game or an industry
has made within a cultural
and social context.
What's striking about
the Atari E.T. game
in the Alamogordo
landfill is that they're
there and not in museums.
I think this is what
excites many people
who keep this narrative alive
is they want to get these items.
They want visible proof.
They want some kind
of tangible evidence
that that dump did take place.
I've
been professionally
making games since about '94.
But more than that,
I'm somebody who
has been chiefly doing
a lot of historical work

with video games.
Trying to preserve
video games, and get
people to understand that
video games are more like art.
And so I've been doing
a lot of video game
preservation and education.
I always thought, one day,
I'm going to get over there,
I'm going to see,
finally, once and for all,
like, where it's buried.
I almost don't even really
need to know what's in it.
I almost want to keep
that mystery alive.
To me, under that landfill
is actually the burial
site of an entire industry.
Because what affected Atari at
the time, affected everyone.
And everything that I thought
was going to go on forever
stopped.
And it stopped almost
at that same moment
that these... whatever's
there... was buried.
So, for me, I want to
find out what is there.
It's like opening the
Ark of the Covenant.
It's like, you kind
of want to look,
but is my face
going to melt off?
I don't know.
I have told my wife that I
will be going to New Mexico.
And she asked me why.
And I started to
explain, and she said,
I don't... I don't need to know.

Just go do it.
You want
it Ernest on screen?
Oh, whatever.
Ernest is my fancy writer name.
Ernie is what
everybody calls me.
All right, so
we'll use your writer's name.
How would you describe yourself?
Screenwriter, novelist,
gentleman adventurer.
The thing about having an Atari,
for me, was it was a simulator.
Like, I could simulate
being Indiana Jones,
or simulate being E.T.
Having access to that.
And coming from a family
of, like, modest means,
and not having to, you
know, beg for quarters.
And just being able to
play as much as you wanted.
That was such a huge
part of my childhood,
and fed my imagination.
And that was the inspiration
for Ready Player One, my novel.
The idea of, like,
what if Willy Wonka
had been a video game designer?
And he held his golden ticket
contest inside his greatest
video game creation?
That all came from
finding those Easter
eggs in all those Atari games.
I feel like a little
kid, this past week.
Like, getting ready
to go to camp.
Alamogordo, and the
Atari graveyard.

For me, it's like holy ground.
And that was when I
realized my DeLorean
is already in New Mexico.
I just have to fly to Santa Fe,
pick up my DeLorean from George
R. R. Martin... who was
using it for the Back
to the Future screening... and
drive it down to Alamogordo.
I could stop at the
very large array,
and also hit Roswell, and
then go to Alamogordo,
and be there for the excavation
of the Atari graveyard.
As soon as those, you know,
tumblers clicked into place,
I'm like, the most epic
road trip of all time.
I have to go.
It's like I'm Indy going to
Westeros to meet Doc Brown,
and then save E.T.
Boom.
Have a great drive, and a
great time in Alamogordo.
George, thank you so much.
I appreciate it man.
My pleasure.
This is
a good piece of evidence,
because right here.
Is that the
date, right there?
Yeah, a date.
You've got Sunday, October
2, 1983, right there.
That's good, right?
Yeah.
Atari was from the 23rd
to the 29th of September.
So this is like a week later.
Well, it's not even a week.

It's like two or
three days later.
Well, I'm not
very good at math.
The Ataris
would have been on the bottom,
then garbage from
the following weeks
would've been piled on top.
So where are the games?
This is following week.
No games yet.
No Atari stuff at all?
No, not yet.
Not yet.
OK.
I love the challenges.
I love the mystery.
I love the... especially when
people say they'll never
be found, or they're not there.
That just makes the
challenge even better.
I put three to four years
of this research, planning,
the politics, the
environment department.
I mean, many, many, many
things to get to this point.
Yeah, no.
It's very important
that we find them.
So,
back in the early '80s,
movie licenses for
video games were just
starting to come into vogue.
And I think Raiders
was the first one.
So they needed someone to
do Raiders of the Lost Ark.
I think what happened was,
Yar's was very successful,
and so they wanted

me to do a big game.
And then it was up to Spielberg.
So when I went down
and met with Spielberg,
and if Spielberg would
have said, you know,
I don't think he's really
right for the game,
they would have
sent someone else.
Can Indiana Jones
escape from the forces of evil?
In Atari's Raiders of the
Lost Ark adventure game.
What was the
reception to the Raiders
of the Lost Ark game?
It was another million seller.
Raiders was huge.
I mean, I can honestly say
I'm the only programmer
in the history of Atari
where every one of my games
that was released
was a million seller.
The word meteoric comes to mind.
And now,
Steven Spielberg brings us
E.T. the Extra Terrestrial.
Spielberg says, well, you know,
my pictures, they open slow.
And they build, and they
hold, and da da da da.
And I just looked at him,
and I didn't know anything.
I said, not this one.
It was E.T.
I said, it's going to open huge
and it's going to stay huge.
OK, the movie comes out.
It's a huge hit.
And we want to do
the cartridge of it.
OK?

You know, every time you try to take some kind of a property and move it into another medium for a pure profit motive, you get trouble. Specifically, with respect to games, you know, it's like, oh you know, like, let's go see if we can exploit this movie as a game. You know, maybe we could make extra money out of a profitable franchise. Now, there was a negotiation going on between the Atari people, and the people at Universal, about what we're going to pay. And Steve Ross, who was the CEO from Warner, got in, and for whatever the reasons, he agrees to a deal that is so off the chart nobody believes it. But he does it. N was \$20 to \$30 million, it was some crazy number. Steve Ross basically was trying to woo Steven Spielberg to come to work for Warner, because he recognized that Spielberg was a genius. And that all plays into this story. Well, we acquired the rights to E.T., and it was... we had to have the game out for Christmas. And that's a problem. One afternoon, I'm sitting in my office, and a call comes in. And it's Ray Kassar. And he's calling from Monterey. So I take the call, and Ray Kassar comes on the phone,

and he says,
Howard, can
you do E.T. in five weeks?
And I said, yes I can.
And he goes...
OK.
In two days, I want you to be
at San Jose Executive Airport.
There'll be a Learjet
waiting for you.
Be on that jet.
Be ready to propose
the game to Spielberg.
During that meeting, when I
flew down on a Learjet to go
meet Spielberg and
present the game to him.
Even though I only
had five weeks,
I still wanted to innovate.
So I proposed a 3D
world that the game
was going to take place on.
And the huge scope what
I was trying to achieve,
it walks that line between
really trying to make something
happen and venturing
into the impossible,
and walking off a cliff.
The emotionality of
the game was supposed
to come out through
the interaction
with the characters.
You have the FBI agent who's
interested in what you have.
That's why the FBI
agent just steals
stuff that you were holding.
You have the scientist who's
interested in who you are.
The scientist actually
carries you back to the city,

because they want to study you.
And Elliott comes
in to save you.
There's times when
you can call Elliott,
and he will help you out.
And so, those are
the kind of things
that I had that I thought
created, possibly,
some sentiment.
And at one point, Spielberg
says to me, he goes, you know,
couldn't you do something
more like Pac-Man?
No, Steven, we need to
do a game that's fresh.
We need to do something that's
really worthy of this movie.
It's not how simple you can
make a complicated game.
It's how complicated
a game can you
make subject to the constraint
of easy learnability.
My job is to produce
a cartridge that
is going to sell for Atari.
A typical VCS game at the
time took five or six months.
And this is going
to be in five weeks.
You might think, no, nobody
can do a game in five weeks.
Like most people in the
department would think.
But I don't think that way.
I think, yeah, I can do that.
The word hubris comes to mind.
I mean, whatever it is I
might have been full of,
I was overflowing
with it at that point.
Because if the game can't

make the Christmas market,
the game is a total waste.
They're going miss their window.
So that was the big thing.
It was the \$22 million
bet that you could turn
the game around in that time.
I had a development
station moved into my home,
so I could be basically working
on this game almost 24 hours.
We found that there was a
good probability of success.
We took a coin operated game and
just ported it over to a game
that we could play on the VCS.
E.T. didn't have that.
Hello?
Is somebody out there?
E.T. video game?
Wow.
It's
the video game that
lets you pretend you're E.T.
OK.
So the game's done.
And one of the
conditions I asked for
was that Steven
Spielberg is the one
who approves the final game.
So Steven Spielberg
played the final game
and approved it for release.
Howard, who is a
certifiable genius,
went off and, about,
a number of weeks
later came back with a
concept and a game plan.
I was amazed at how difficult
it was, yet at the same time
how much fun it was to play.
I've seen the final game.

Oh yeah, yeah, it's my favorite.
Of course I'm biased,
I made the movie.
Steven
Spielberg thought it was OK,
so I thought, all right,
I'm good with that.
And... not that I'm
blaming him for anything.
No, of course not.
But...
But it's his fault.
The video game that
lets you help E.T. get home
just in time for Christmas.
After E.T. was released,
there was a great
sense of relief
that we'd actually
made the schedule.
And everything was good.
And then the game
went out into market,
and it was very high
on the billboard list.
And again, things were good.
I got E.T., I think
it was Christmas of 1982,
if I remember correctly.
And I thought it
was like... I was
to be the guy on the street who
had E.T. before everybody else.
Turns out everybody I knew
got E.T. that Christmas.
After a while,
people start going by
me in the halls... people
from other buildings, people
from marketing, and management.
And they're saying things like,
you know, you know something,
Howard, you did a great job.
We don't blame you.

That was really
something, what you did.
You really came
through for us there,
and we don't want you to
think we think anything else.
This really isn't about you.
Don't feel bad.
It's OK, it's cool.
And I'm thinking, like, what
the hell are they talking about?
E.T. was a really hard game.
It was the kind of game
that was brutal, unfair,
it didn't make a lot of sense.

I:

grew up in London,
and there was a video
game store in my town
that let you rent... I don't know
what the rental was, like 50
pence for a weekend...
and I still remember
feeling like I wasted my money.
Because it just... it was bad.
People aren't liking it.
And people aren't
liking it a lot.
And what made it particularly
bad was my memory of the movie
was SO great.
I loved the movie.
Everyone loved the
movie when it came out.
It's a great movie.
Still is it is a
classic movie today.
And so this massive
chasm that existed
between the quality of the movie
and the quality of the game
that was based on, I think just
made it seem that much more

like a slap in the face.
OK, well, maybe it
won't sell six million.
Maybe it will only
sell four million.
Or three million,
that would be OK.
And then there's, like, returns.
People are returning the game.
They made too many.
How many they made,
I don't even know.
They made, like, four
million cartridges.
That means there could be
millions of carts coming back.
So what do you do with
useless, worthless product'?
How do you get rid of it?
Bury it.
That's a pretty good answer.
Well, career change
is not anything new for me.
I've been through a number
of different careers.
I actually went and got
a California real estate
license, and then
a broker's license,
and did that for a while.
And I did that just
long enough to know
this was, like, the last thing
in the world I wanted to do.
And now I am a licensed,
practicing psychotherapist
in California.
And I'm a very unique therapist,
in that I have a Master's
of Engineering and I also
have a Master of Arts
in counseling psychology.
I mean, I'm the Silicon
Valley therapist.

I'm very good at translating
between English and nerd.
And this is the first time since
I left Atari that I feel I'm
doing what I really love doing.
So it took me 30 years
to get back to a place
that I don't feel I'm a step
down from where I used to work.
And that's many,
many different jobs.
I know this dig is coming up,
and I'm going to be there.
I'm going to be
standing right there.
And I am going to literally
watch my past being dug up.
And that's a weird kind
of thing to anticipate.
My hopes are in one way, and
my expectations are another.
And I don't know what
it's going to be.
I really don't know
what it's going to be.
I don't know what it's
going to mean to me when,
if something comes
up, if it's there.
Part of punk archeology
is that sense of community.
And the fact that we're
helping each other out
to address the issues
that we're interested in.
And most of the time we're
doing it on a volunteer basis.
It's going to be interesting to
see how they decide to excavate
in order to clear a
better area, you know,
so that we can get at more
of the content that we need.
One of the people down

there did confirm finding
a Donny and Marie poster.
Yeah, yeah, which is awesome.
Well, basically,
because we're going
to treat this as a
salvage excavation,
we will dig a trench.
We'll go through and excavate
the material in the pits
that we dig.
At which point, we'll send
them up to the tables.
We'll sort through the material.
We'll weigh it.
We'll count it.
Identify it.
And, yeah, that's the plan.
What's
happened so far today?
Basically, we started
digging in the hole,
and the trucks have
already started
going through the train.
So, just so people understand...
and probably, right now I'm
cutting to an awesome
diagram of this.
There's, like, 20
feet of garbage
that's on the top of wherever
the games are buried.
Garbage and dirt.
Sorry,
garbage and dirt.
In the diagram it's
going to be pretty clear.
And so, that all has
to be taken away.
Yeah,
we'll get the vast majority
of the hole excavated out.
And so far,

have we found anything?
Found any Atari games?
No, nothing.
Nothing.
Nothing yet.
And Son, I mean, you
seem pretty nervous.
Right.
Are you?
Oh yeah, terrified.
Terrified.
OK.
I gotta be honest,
I'm nervous as shit.
I don't know if that'll help
motivate you guys, but...
Yeah, that did it for us.
We need to get back to work.
Yeah.
Great.
Let's go.
Go team.
Way to go.
Son, calm down, buddy.
People say nerd or geek.
I say enthusiast.
I love things, and I love
people who love things.
But if you spend all your time
focusing on all the amazing,
like, art and entertainment
that's being made,
there's so much of
it happening now,
you can't even take it all in.
And it's like the dig.
When I tell people, like, the
right kind people about it,
they're like, I can't believe
that it's finally happening.
And that you're going
to get to be there.
You know, I get,
look, goosebumps.

Goosebumps talking about it.
My local video game shop
in Austin, Texas, Game
Over Video Games, they gave
me every copy they have
of every one of Howard's games.
Little known fact... E.T. has the
very first official video game
Easter egg ever in a video game.
Warren Robinett had the
very first one in Adventure,
but he did that without
anybody knowing.
Howard asked if he could
put Easter eggs in the game,
and Atari said yes.
If you go find the
geranium, and you
make the germanium
regenerate, it turns
into Yar, from Yar's Revenge.
And he flies away.
The first time it happened to
me, when I was 11 years old,
I shit myself.
And then if you do it
again, it turns into Indy
from Raiders of the Lost Ark.
So Howard hid characters
from this game
and this game in this game.
Hello.
Hi, good afternoon.
Welcome to the Lodge.
Well, it's nice to be here.
Are you checking in?
- Absolutely.
Great.
Can I get the last name.
Warshaw.
W-A-R-S-H-A-W.
Howard.
That's me.
So it's the day

of the actual dig.
And my Wife and I are in a van,
on our way to the landfill.
It was a strange feeling.
I mean, I was, like, nervous.
And I didn't really
understand why.
But I just had this sense...
just like a tingly thing...
that something is
going on here today.
And as we pull
into the landfill,
there were already people there.
And there's more people.
And we go on, and
there's more people.
And it just keeps
going and going.
I guess it sort of felt like
a religious pilgrimage to me.
I called up some
friends, and said, hey,
can we get down there?
And I asked my brother-in-law
if he wanted to go.
Heck, let's do it.
Let's check it out.
And my wife said, whatever.
It's one of those
weird monumental video
game based events that only
comes around once a century.
This is our generation's
urban legend.
Billions of cartridges
out in the desert.
Growing up, you always read
the little rumors about it.
I grew up playing
an Atari, which
my babysitters had given me.
And I actually
had the E.T. game.

My friend and I, she
and I would actually
just for fun on
the weekends, drive
around trying to
figure out where would
these Atari games be buried.
It's the fun of the legend.
It's like looking for
the Loch Ness monster.
What did you
think when you played
the E.T. game last night?
It was awesome.
Because in my opinion,
I like terrible games.
To come back and to
relive the feeling
I got off those games is
something I couldn't pass up.
I just want to know
about the urban myth.
See if it's really
buried out here.
I just came out here to be
part of video game history.
Had to see whether
it's true or not.
You have to be a
special kind of nerd
to be able to want to drive
28 hours for a video game.
The myth
that E.T., the video game,
for the Atari 2600 was the
worst video game all time,
it would be so great
to debunk that,
because it's just not true.
But also to redeem
Howard Scott Warshaw,
because he's an amazing
video game designer,
and his game was great.

Ha ha, cool car.
Yeah, I like that.
E.T.'s in there.
This
morning, coming to a dump
in a small town in New Mexico.
There were people lined
up, waiting to get in.
When's the last time
you saw line of people
waiting to get into a dump?
It totally took me by surprise,
but in a delightful way.
You never go to a dump unless
you're throwing something away,
and here we are, trying to find
treasure... buried treasure.
I think they'll
find something.
I mean, the cartridges
had to go somewhere.
Why not here?
It is a lot of
open space, great place
to dump a million cartridges.
There is a definite
possibility that there is games.
This is archeology
for the time I grew up.
So nostalgia for anything
that came out of that era
is pretty high.
All right, now the wind is
really picking up, on cue.
On cue.
The weather
here, in Alamogordo
is awesome if you
like sandstorms
and an impending doom
filled cloud of white.
Whoa.
Aw, this is getting brutal.
Yeah.

Sorry, this is brutal.
Getting very windy.
Basically, what's
happening is the white sands
are blowing in from White
Sands, and covering everything.
And it's really shitty.
They're saying this is
like a historic wind today.
Really?
That's what somebody told us.
To think that we're
in the middle of a sandstorm.
Really?
This is what's going on?
And for me it was almost
like the big sand storm
right at the opening
of Close Encounters,
you know, the people wearing
the goggles and the bandannas.
Everybody's like, gather around,
because they found something.
And they can't believe
what they've found.
Are we the first?
This is Tony
Johnson, from Denver,
Colorado, who ran up
to me in my DeLorean.
He's like, I found something.
I found something.
And Tony is going to
go down in history,
because he found the first
evidence of Atari hardware.
Whoa.
Whoa, that's pretty huge.
Right there it is, my man.
Uh, ladies and gentlemen,
we have an announcement.
So, Tony, tell us
what you just found.
An Atari 2600 joystick toggle.

So, Tony, where
did you find it?
Walking to the bathroom.
So it was a surface find?
Surface find.
Yeah, like we know what
a surface find is, right?
Well, a surface find
is something... you know,
you're walking around, you're
looking down on the ground,
you see something interesting
and you pick it up.
It's totally out of
archaeological context.
What are the odds that that,
like, blew out of the hole?
Actually, I think
they're pretty good.
I mean, the wind is blowing
fiercely in that direction.
You know, the stuff's
coming out of the bucket.
You know, we've been finding
a lot of interesting things
that date from around that time.
Anything from Atari?
Uh, nothing from Atari yet.
How can you authenticate this?
Can you carbon date it?
No, it's much too
recent for that.
There are really two things
that we could be dealing with,
when taking a look
at these cartridges,
if they're actually there.
First thing is that
they just loaded
the trucks are these cartridges,
and then they dumped them.
And that's the best
possible scenario,
because you could pull

them out, and I bet you
most of them would be playable.
You know, they've
just been in there
for... you know, since 1983.
We're right about
where we need to be,
but there's still no
Atari detritus at all.
We've been here for
a while, all ready.
It's tedious.
The wind's horrible.
We're wondering if they're
going to find anything or not.
I don't think there's
anything in that hole
except rattlesnakes
and scorpions.
If it's buried, it's
probably for a reason.
It should stay buried.
I wasn't thinking that
something was really
messed up until late '83.
To me, Atari was
never going to go away.
It was this thing that
was just part of my life.
And the thought that
there could ever
be a day where there was no
Atari... or no Atari 2600... I
never crossed my mind.
E.T. comes out, and
E.T. is not so great.
And somewhere toward
the end of the year
I'm starting to wonder,
are we making our numbers?
Which leads to one of the
worst nights of my life.
On December 7, 1982 I get a
call from Dennis Groth, who

was the CFO of Atari,
and he says,
Manny,
here's the new budget.
And it's a huge shortfall
from what we have been told.
Warner Communications
said today
that its once booming Atari
business lost another \$180
million dollars in the third
quarter, for total losses
this year of more than
half a billion dollars.
I was starting to see
enough signs in the company
that things were
starting to unravel.
It was unraveling
is hard and fast.
And we didn't have
any ready solutions.
Several Atari executives,
including Atari's chairman,
Raymond Kassar, sold
Warner stock shortly
before the negative
earnings announcement,
and the decline in the
price of the stock.
Kassar denies any
wrongdoing or impropriety,
but a number of stockholders
have sued Warner.
So they got rid of Ray Kassar,
and they brought in a
guy from Phillip Morris.
And when he came in, Atari
had 10,000 employees.
And within about four
months, or five months,
Atari had 2000 employees.
I really got that we had
lost 80% of our staff.

In the short run, the market
is frequently irrational.
In the longer run,
hopefully it's rational.
The wild upside ride was over.
I did not understand the extent of
the downside ride that was coming.
This is slipping away.
The train is derailing.
It's not going to keep riding,
and what am I going to do next?
It was a big emotional blow.
It was my baby, and I
hated to see it abused.
New Media magazine
credited E.T. with destroying
the video game industry.
That's interesting.
I think that's really
interesting that I could be
single handedly
responsible for toppling
a billion dollar industry.
E.T. comes out.
The industry dies.
Howard's associated
with that, and I
think that's...
that's affected his career,
and what people will
remember him for.
And that's... that's pretty bad.
The fact that a guy's career
got destroyed because
he did E.T.,
given the circumstances
surrounding doing E.T.,
is... it's completely unfair.
I mean, it's sad.
It's really sad.
There's this
video game walk of fame.
There's also this show called
DICE, where they give out

lifetime achievement awards.
Howard's not in that.
He's not put in that same group.
They kind of keep him
out of all these things,
and it's kind of a shame.
The day I left Atari.
When things had really fallen
apart, and it was over.
And I'm literally carrying
my garbage out to my car
to leave for the last time.
That was a very
depressing moment for me.
Because I felt I
was losing the most
important thing in my life.
And I also knew it
was so unreal that I'd
never be able to recreate it.
The burial in Alamogordo is
basically Atari's funeral.
The burial of those cartridges
represents the burial
of that beautiful era.
And that may be what's
interesting about it.
I don't know, I mean,
that's a whole psychology
I'm not going to go near.
But it may be because it is
about the death of Atari.
That's what it is.
We can't control
how the past returns to us.
We may get something
that no longer
resembles an E.T. cartridge.
We may get something
monstrous, something twisted,
something decayed.
We may not even know
what we're looking
at if we unearth Atari's E.T...

Part of me feels
that when you finally crack open
this place, and
you start to look,
it's going to be a lot like
the Ark of the Covenant.
It's just going to
be a bunch of sand.
But another part of
me hopes that what's
found there is going
to lead to a lot more
understanding, and
a lot more discovery
about what really happened.
What's his name?
Joe.
Joe!
They want me to come in?
Let's go.
So what's up?
You guys find something?
I should have
brought my binoculars.
Could you show me?
They're
bringing some stuff
over to the archaeologists'
table right now.
Let's see what's going on.
Can everybody hear me?
We found something.
The archaeologists have
confirmed it's from 1983.
28 feet down.
It's E.T., the video game.
Intact in its box.
Wow.
There you go, Son.
It's an emotional,
emotional event.
They've backed up
this legend with fact,
and it's incredible

to be a part of it.

Good job, Joe.

I wasn't nervous until we
got down to that, where he was
almost reaching his max length.

But yeah, it was a big
weight off my shoulders
when that bucket came
up and E.T. was there.

Congratulations.

Thank you.

I didn't think they were
going to find them intact,
I thought for sure they'd
be crushed and ruined.

Now I've got
goosebumps, and it's
not because of the dust storm.

What's this moment
like for you?

Look at all the
excitement that's
been generated
today over something
that I did 32 years ago.

It just... it's an immensely
personal thing.

What it took to make
these games, was a lot.

And this one was
done in five weeks.

That was one of the hardest
five weeks of my life.

So I need a little moment.

I'm just so excited to be here.

A lot of these people are
complaining about E.T.
and never actually even played it.

And I ever since then,
I would talk to people,
and we would talk about
E.T., and I'm like,
well, have you ever
played the game?

And it would come
out that they didn't.
They would just kind of
continue this myth of the game
being really horrible.
It is a good game.
It wasn't the worst
that Atari had to offer.
There was, like... I remember
getting a game called Fire Fly.
That is the worst
game for Atari.
That's what every
should be focusing
their efforts on, not E.T.
Now let me be clear,
the worst game ever made
was obviously Trespasser.
So I just want to
be clear with that.
With the shitload of
just horrible, poorly made
cranked out Atari games,
to call E.T.
the worst one is just...
shameful.
In contemporary game culture
we like trashing games.
I don't mean putting
them in landfills,
but verbally,
trashing game design.
It's become fashionable to sort
of regard E.T. as the worst
video game of all time.
In fact, it makes everybody's
list as the number one.
And I'm going to go
out on a complete limb
here, and say... maybe people
will attack me for this...
but I'd rather play Atari's
E.T. than any Call of Duty.
In context, given the time and

the situation that Howard had
to live in, to
program that game,
it really is an
astonishing master work.
He made an amazing
fucking game that's
a whole self-contained
world in five weeks,
that's even more impressive.
I don't know any human
being who could have turned
E.T., in the time
frames involved,
into a really successful game.
He should be
applauded for being
able to have done anything in
the time that was allotted.
The scorn should be
heaped upon those
who thought it was even rational
to try to build a cartridge
in a month and a half.
The analogy that people always
use for these first timers...
for people who try
something first...
is the first penguin analogy.
Where the first penguin
who jumps down the hole
through the ice is
the one who invariably
gets eaten by the seal.
But if there wasn't
a first penguin,
then the penguins wouldn't be
going down through the ice.
So, it sucks to be
the first penguin,
but somebody's got to do it.
So it turned
out that Joe Lewandowski
had been right all along.

The games were buried, almost exactly where he had predicted. And no mercury filled pigs popped up out of the ground. So the legend of the burial was true. Or was it? When the archaeologists cataloged all the games, there were a bunch of E.T. cartridges, but nowhere near the millions that were such a big part of the legend. In fact, E.T. made up about 10% of the total games found. The rest included some of the best games ever made, Defender, and Centipede, and Yar's Revenge. There was even one copy of Adventure, which I snagged. The burial wasn't a cover up, or done out of shame. It was a warehouse dump done by a company in financial distress. At the time, the Alamogordo landfill was just the most practical solution. E.T. wasn't buried because it was the worst game ever. People called it the worst game ever because it had been buried. And as a result, it got blamed for destroying an entire industry. The game and its creator had taken the rap for a crime they didn't commit. The notion that E.T. caused the demise of Atari is simply stupid.

It's just stupid.
Atari committed suicide.
It was not homicide.
And it wasn't the
E.T. cartridge.
It was a concomitant effect of
a lot of missteps in technology,
and deployment, and marketing.
Some people say E.T. destroyed
the video game industry.
And I'm sure I've
heard that before,
but it's just really funny.
No.
The behavior pattern that
created the conditions
for the E.T. failure
is what destroyed
the video game industry.
The cause of the fall was
Atari trying to sell yet
another 10 million Atari
2600s into a market that
was saturated.
E.T. didn't destroy Atari.
It wasn't good, but it
didn't destroy Atari.
That's one of those
things people say.
And the reality of life is,
if enough people say it,
it becomes the truth for people.
A simple answer that
is clear and precise
will always have
more power in the world
than a complex one
that is true.
Here's another E.T. six-pack.
What I would like
to see happen,
is I would like to see
whatever remains are recovered
will then find their

way into a museum,
in the service of game history.
Well, you know,
the city of Alamogordo
owns the games
and what have you
that came through there,
by virtue of the fact
they are in our landfill.
We might be able to
sell them on eBay.
So, if another
terrible video game needed
to be buried, will
you be prepared to
let it be buried
in Alamogordo?
Absolutely.
Come on down, we'll
bury your game.
Atari was the first
great consumer company
to come out of Silicon Valley.
It was exciting.
It was different.
It was the first engagement
that a generation
had with computers.
So a generation grew up being
introduced to the computer age
by Atari games.
We brought a whole massive
new entertainment medium
into public consciousness.
So for a whole generation,
we are the definition
of the video game era.
And it's cosmic.
These guys really never
got their due for really
starting the whole industry.
Three lives was
invented by a person.
Flying a ship around was

invented by a person, who had
to figure out what that was.
And it was so good that
it was copied everywhere.
And because it was
copied everywhere,
and because it's
so ubiquitous,
it's impossible to remember
why it was so special.
I think Atari's
legacy is that we
started the Silicon Valley ethic
of engineers as rock stars.
It didn't exist before.
I think the casual
culture, the meritocracy,
didn't exist before.
I believe these were
underpinnings of the things
that made, and continue to
make, Silicon Valley
a special place in the world.
And I think that Atari
will continue to endure
as an icon of innovation.