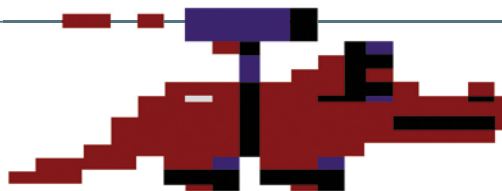


Under the management of media group Warner, Atari turned into a computer manufacturer. Four joystick ports, two cartridge slots, great graphics and sound made Atari computers the best games machines of the early 1980s.

Atari 800

USA, 1979



Units sold: Unknown
 Number of games: 1,000
 Game storage: Cartridge, Disk, Tape
 Games developed until: 1990
 ★★★★★

From 1972, Nolan Bushnell's Pong arcade machines and consoles paved the way for a global market of electronic games. Within the entertainment industry his company quickly became the hottest thing since sliced bread. In 1976, prior to the release of the Atari VCS 2600 console, media giant Warner gobbled up Atari, pumping it with millions of dollars for the next step in the process: Atari's goal was to conquer the nascent computer market. Instead of a new console, Warner's manager Ray Kassar presented the 8-bit computer Atari 800 and its smaller brother Atari 400.

With two cartridge slots, four joystick ports and a custom circuitry focused on graphics and animation, the Atari 800 shone as the perfect games machine in 1979. Arcade conversions made up a good portion of the early software, but at the same time, games exclusively developed for the 800 appeared. Doug Neubauer's 3D space odyssey **Star Raiders** lit the development scene's fire. When asked today, many game creators name this title as their major influence and the reason for buying and programming the Atari 800 instead of an Apple or Commodore computer.



The bulky, lavish Atari 800 had a flap covering the cartridge slots, internal expansion capabilities, and four joystick ports as standard.



The forces of light vs. darkness: in the action-strategy hybrid Archon (1983), fantasy chess pieces battle it out in real-time.

In 1982, Bill Stealey and Sid Meier launched Microprose to produce and sell Atari games. Other star designers of the 8-bit era were Paul Edelstein, Bill Hogue, Jon Freeman and Chris Crawford of **Eastern Front** fame. The starting line-up of former Apple employee Trip Hawkins' new company was devoted to the Atari too: Hawkins marketed Freefall's **Archon** and Dan Bunten's **M.U.L.E.** as 'Electronic Arts'.

Atari's 8-bit hardware was devised and developed by Jay Miner, Joe Decuir, Steven Mayer and Douglas Neubauer, the team that previously invented the VCS 2600. Lyle Rains, one of Atari's most experienced arcade game developers, was responsible for the graphics. The external company SMI provided the BASIC operating system (project manager Paul Laughton went on to create AppleDOS).



The Atari's powerful hardware sprites and colors were not only put to good use in action games like Miner 2049er (1982)...



The Atari 400 was the small and cheap alternative to its big brother Atari 800.

The team conceived a hardware concept that was revolutionary at the time. Three custom chips supported the 6502 CPU: the Alphanumeric Television Interface Circuit (ANTIC) was a graphics processor with its own command set and DMA access to RAM. It controlled Rain's patented TV interface chip GTIA, which took care of color, animation and collision detection. With its 'player-missile' graphics, the Atari 800 was well ahead of the 'sprites' used in later computers and consoles. The third chip 'Pokey' combined I/O functions with sound and random number generation.

With its Multi-LSI architecture, the Atari 800 replaced the year-older Apple II as the best games computer. However, it had merely one year of dominance before the Commodore C64 took over most of the home computer market. In hindsight, the Atari 800 was caught in the



...but also in joystick-driven strategy simulations such as Chris Crawford's Eastern Front (1981).