

The art of Atari – the masters who brought early games to life by filling in the blanks

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With only a 1.19MHz CPU to play with, a lot of Atari 2600 design had to be created outside the games themselves by artists who brought fantasies boldly to life.

In a new book, enthusiast Tim Lapetino looks at the history of Atari game covers, such as Video Chess, Defender and Warlords (above), starting from the console's debut in 1977. "The visual styles are a combination of the artists' creativity and the inherent limitations of the console itself," he says. "Those beautiful illustrations served as a gateway connecting the imaginations of gamers to the simple game graphics. I believe Orson Welles said 'The absence of limitations is the enemy of art,' and I think that's true for these artists' works."

Atari commissioned 136 pieces in total, and tracking each of them down has been quite a task for Lapetino. "At times I've felt like a private eye," he says, "paging through old magazines, internal Atari newsletters, viewing negatives through printers' loupes. At that time in the video game industry, it was not standard practice to credit artists and creators, so we've relied on scarce documentation, art collectors, fan websites, former Atari employees, and the memories of the illustrators themselves. It has been a hunt to even identify some of the artists, much less reach them. We've unearthed a lot about the culture of the artists and Atari, and we're excited to preserve these stories.

"We are hoping to provide as complete a picture of the art of Atari in that era as possible," Lapetino continues. "Its history, and the stories behind these unsung artists, are worth preserving, because the games themselves are part of a rich, pop cultural heritage. But this is a challenging task, as much of the original work has been lost to time or neglect, and Atari's archives are non-existent as the company changed hands many times. Our book will be a showcase of as much as we've been able to unearth, and our search continues. Some of our hope in promoting the book early is to use the publicity to unearth even more artwork, stories, and materials, to better flesh out the whole picture."



The original artwork for Atari 2600 release Defender, one of 136 illustrations commissioned by Atari.

All of the artworks were commissioned by Atari itself and produced by freelance and in-house illustrators. Art directors and managers like Jim Kelly and Steve Hendricks directed younger talent while also creating work, and Atari paid well for top-quality illustrations from great names like Ralph McQuarrie, famous for his Star Wars concepts, and Rick Guidice, known for his NASA visualization work.

Lapetino hopes The Art Of Atari: From Pixels To Paintbrush will be out for Christmas 2014. "There is still much to do, so we don't have a firm date," adds Lapetino. "The current financial troubles of Atari's modern incarnation also complicate our efforts, but we'll finish it as soon as we can, so many others can appreciate and enjoy the art of Atari the way we have."

Artworks for Video Chess and Warlords are below – click on either image for the full illustration.



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