

READING CHALLENGE

The First Video Game Ever

From a tiny screen in a science lab to a billion-dollar industry

Level	A2 (Elementary)
Age Group	Teens (11-16)
Topic	Science & Technology
Duration	~15 minutes
Skill	Reading

Today, billions of people around the world play video games. You can play on your phone, on a **console**, or on a computer. Games have incredible graphics, huge open worlds, and millions of players **online** at the same time. But it was not always like this. The very first video game was a simple tennis game on a tiny **screen** — and it was made more than 65 years ago. This is the story of how video games began.

Tennis for Two (1958)

The story starts in a **laboratory** in New York, USA. In 1958, a scientist named William Higinbotham worked at a place called Brookhaven National **Laboratory**. Every year, the **laboratory** had an open day. People from the local area came to visit and see what the scientists were doing. But most of the displays were boring — just pictures and text on the walls. Higinbotham wanted to make something fun for the visitors.

Higinbotham had an idea. He used a special computer and a small round **screen** called an oscilloscope to create a simple tennis game. The game showed a tennis court from the side. A small dot — the ball — moved across the **screen**. Two players could hit the ball back and forth using simple controllers with buttons and dials. He called it “Tennis for Two.”

The game was a huge hit. Visitors loved it. They stood in long lines to play. Some people waited for hours just to have a turn. But Higinbotham did not think his game was very important. He did not try to sell it or make money from it. He just wanted to entertain people for one afternoon. He took the game apart after the open day and never thought about it again. He had no idea that he had just invented something that would change the world.

Spacewar! (1962)

A few years later, in 1962, a group of students at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) created another early video game. It was called Spacewar! The game showed two small spaceships on a **screen**. Two players controlled the ships and tried to shoot each other while a star in the middle pulled them with its gravity. The game was exciting and fun to play.

Spacewar! spread quickly to other universities in America. Students copied the game and shared it with their friends. But there was a problem: the computers needed to play it were huge and very expensive. Only universities and big companies had them. Normal people could not play video games at home. Not yet.

The Father of Home Video Games

In 1966, a German-American engineer named Ralph Baer had a brilliant idea. What if people could play games on their television at home? At that time, almost every family in America had a TV. Baer thought: why not use that TV **screen** for games?

Baer and his small team worked for years. They built a device called the “Brown Box” — a simple machine that connected to a normal television. It could play several different games, including a tennis game. In 1972, a company called Magnavox bought Baer’s idea and sold it as the Magnavox Odyssey. It was the first home video game **console** in history. It was not very **popular** — the graphics were very basic, and the games were simple. But it was the beginning of something huge. Today, Ralph Baer is often called the “Father of Video Games.”

Pong Changes Everything (1972)

In the same year, 1972, a young American businessman named Nolan Bushnell started a company called Atari. Bushnell had played Spacewar! at university and he wanted to make video games that everyone could enjoy. His first big game was called Pong.

Pong was a simple table tennis game. Two white rectangles on the **screen** were the paddles. A small white square was the ball. Players moved their paddles up and down to hit the ball. That was it. The graphics were incredibly basic — just white shapes on a black background. Every shape was made of large pixels. But Pong was fun. It was very, very fun.

Bushnell put the first Pong machine in a bar in California. The next morning, the bar owner called him. The machine was broken. Bushnell went to fix it and discovered the problem — the coin box was so full of coins that the machine had jammed! Everyone in the bar had been playing Pong all night. Bushnell knew he had a hit.

Pong **arcade** machines appeared in bars, restaurants, and shopping centres all over America. Then Atari made a home version that people could play on their TVs. Millions of people bought it. The age of video games had truly begun.

The Golden Age of Arcades (1978-1983)

The late 1970s and early 1980s were the golden age of **arcade** games. Special **arcade** halls opened in cities everywhere. Young people spent their coins playing amazing new games. Space Invaders arrived in 1978 — players had to shoot rows of aliens that moved slowly down the **screen**. It was so **popular** in Japan that the country ran out of 100-yen coins!

Then came Pac-Man in 1980. A small, round, yellow **character** moved through a maze, eating dots and avoiding ghosts. Pac-Man became the first real video game superstar. Everyone knew his name. There were Pac-Man T-shirts, cartoons, songs, and even breakfast cereal.

Donkey Kong arrived in 1981. It was created by a young Japanese designer named Shigeru Miyamoto. The hero of the game was a small man in a red hat who had to rescue a princess from a giant gorilla. That small man would later become the most famous video game **character** in history: Mario.

The Crash of 1983

But then something went wrong. By 1983, too many companies were making too many bad games. The quality was terrible. One famous example was the E.T. game for the Atari 2600. It was made in just five weeks and it was so bad that millions of copies were returned to shops. Atari buried thousands of game cartridges in a desert in New Mexico. People stopped trusting video games. Sales crashed. Many companies went bankrupt. In America, people thought video games were finished forever.

Nintendo Saves the Day (1985)

They were wrong. In 1985, a Japanese company called Nintendo released the Nintendo Entertainment System (NES) in America. It came with a game called Super Mario Bros., designed by Shigeru Miyamoto. The game was colourful, fun, and full of surprises. Players controlled Mario as he ran, jumped, and collected coins in a magical mushroom kingdom.

The NES was a massive success. It saved the video game **industry**. Nintendo showed that video games could be high quality, creative, and fun for the whole family. Other famous Nintendo games followed: The Legend of Zelda, Metroid, and many more. A whole **generation** of children grew up with Nintendo.

The Console Wars

In the 1990s, video games became even bigger. New consoles appeared and companies started to **compete** with each other. Sega released the Mega Drive (called Genesis in America) and its fast blue **character** Sonic the Hedgehog became Mario's biggest rival. Nintendo fought back with the Super Nintendo.

Then, in 1994, Sony entered the market with the PlayStation. It used CDs instead of cartridges, which meant games could be bigger and more complex. The PlayStation was a huge success. It brought gaming to older players too — not just children. Games like Final Fantasy VII and Metal Gear Solid told deep, emotional stories. Video games were growing up.

The Online Revolution

The 2000s brought the biggest change of all: **online** gaming. Now players could connect to the internet and play with people from all over the world. Games like World of Warcraft, Call of Duty, and later Fortnite and Minecraft let millions of players share the same **virtual** world at the same time.

Mobile gaming also exploded. When Apple released the iPhone in 2007, it changed everything again. Suddenly, everyone had a game **console** in their pocket. Simple games like Angry Birds and Candy Crush became global hits. Today, more people play games on their phones than on any other device.

Video Games Today

Today, the video game **industry** makes more money than the movie and music industries combined. More than three billion people play video games worldwide. Games are not just entertainment — they are art, sport, and culture. Professional gamers **compete** in huge tournaments for millions of dollars. This is called esports, and it has millions of fans.

Modern games look almost real. Characters have detailed faces, realistic hair, and natural movements. Open-world games let you explore enormous landscapes. **Virtual** reality headsets put you inside the game itself. And new technology like cloud gaming means you can play the biggest games on any device, anywhere.

From Tennis for Two to Today

It is amazing to think that all of this started with a small dot bouncing on a tiny **screen** in a science **laboratory** in 1958. William Higinbotham just wanted to make his visitors smile. He never imagined that his simple tennis game would lead to Mario, Minecraft, and millions of gamers around the world.

The history of video games teaches us something important: big things often start small. A simple idea — hitting a dot across a **screen** — grew into one of the largest and most creative industries on the planet. And the story is far from over. New games, new technology, and new ways to play are being invented every day. The next chapter of video game history might be written by someone your age. Maybe it will be written by you.

Vocabulary

Term	Definition
screen	the flat surface on a TV, computer, or phone where you see pictures and words
controller	a device you hold in your hands to play a video game
invent	to create something completely new that did not exist before
laboratory	a room or building where scientists do experiments and research
visitor	a person who comes to see a place or a person
pixel	a very tiny dot on a screen that makes up part of an image
arcade	a place with many coin-operated game machines where people go to play
console	a special electronic device made for playing video games at home
popular	liked by many people
compete	to try to win against other people in a game or contest
character	a person, animal, or figure in a story, film, or game
online	connected to the internet
industry	a type of business that makes or sells a particular product or service
generation	all the people who are about the same age, like your parents or grandparents
virtual	made by a computer to look and feel real, but not actually real

Comprehension Quiz

1. Who created Tennis for Two, and when?

- A) Nolan Bushnell in 1972
- B) William Higinbotham in 1958
- C) Ralph Baer in 1967
- D) Shigeru Miyamoto in 1981

2. What was special about Ralph Baer's invention?

- A) It was the first game you could play on a home television
- B) It was the first game with colour graphics
- C) It was the first game with sound effects
- D) It was the first game for mobile phones

3. Why did Atari's Pong become so successful?

- A) It was free to play
- B) It had beautiful 3D graphics
- C) It was simple, fun, and easy to understand
- D) It was the first game with a story

4. What happened in the video game crash of 1983?

- A) All video games were banned by the government
- B) Too many bad games were made and people stopped buying them
- C) A virus destroyed all the game machines
- D) Nintendo went bankrupt

5. How much money does the video game industry make today compared to movies and music?

- A) Much less than movies and music
- B) About the same as movies and music
- C) More than movies and music combined
- D) Nobody knows the exact numbers

Answer Key

#	Answer	Question
1	B	1. Who created Tennis for Two, and when?
2	A	2. What was special about Ralph Baer's invention?
3	C	3. Why did Atari's Pong become so successful?
4	B	4. What happened in the video game crash of 1983?
5	C	5. How much money does the video game industry make today compared to movies and music?