A video games timeline: from Pong to the console wars

November 5 2020, by Oliver Hotham

Video games have gone from a fringe past-time to a multibillion-dollar industry

Video games have come a long way since the first rudimentary arcade machines emerged in the 1970s with offerings such as "Pong", "Pacman" and "Space Invaders".

Each generation since then has enjoyed rapid technological advancement, and the industry is now worth billions.

With the release of Microsoft's Xbox X and Sony's PlayStation 5 just days away, here follows a look at the journey of video games.

King 'Pong'

Now widely regarded as the first video game to achieve serious commercial success, Atari's 1972 "Pong" allowed two people to play a basic game of table tennis on a black screen.

The graphics were simple, but it was a hit—a version of the game designed to play at home sold more than 100,000 units and set the stage for the multibillion-dollar gaming industry we know today.

The first mega-hits

The success of "Pong" laid the groundwork for an explosion of arcade games in the late 1970s and early 1980s, with the frenetic "Pacman" and alien shoot-em-up "Space Invaders" raking in billions from coin-rich youngsters desperate to post a high score.

But it was the advent of home consoles such as the Atari 2600 and the Nintendo NES around the same time that took video games from arcades into living rooms.

Games popularised in this period still resonate today. One early Nintendo game—the 1981 platformer "Donkey Kong"—featured a character known as Jumpman, later known as Mario, one of the best-known video game heroes of all time.

Atari's 1972 game 'Pong' set the stage for the multibillion-dollar gaming industry

Console wars

As the market for games grew, so too did competition between hardware manufacturers, leading to the first of many "console wars" in the early 1990s between Sega and Nintendo.

Sega ultimately emerged victorious—in part due to the popularity of its "Sonic the Hedgehog" franchise—but its Genesis console never quite enjoyed the longevity of some of its competitors.

The 1990s also brought massive innovation for video games—both in visual presentation and plot.

First-person-shooters like "Goldeneye" and action-adventure puzzler "Tomb Raider" revolutionised both graphics and storytelling, offering a more mature experience for an increasingly diverse audience.

Going global

By the turn of the century, the stage was set for a new generation of home systems—and an all-new round of console wars, this time between the PlayStation 2, Nintendo GameCube, and a new contender from Microsoft, the Xbox.

The PlayStation 2 won that fight, becoming the best-selling console of all time with 155 million units moved, according to Forbes.

In the 1990s video games saw huge innovations visually and in storytelling

Multiplayer madness

The following decade saw games go online, allowing players to go from one-on-one matches in their living rooms to battles with scores of other players all over the world.

From chaotic first-person shooter "Call of Duty" to the massive multiplayer role-playing game "World of Warcraft", online gaming became a billion-dollar industry in its own right—and laid the groundwork for the massive growth of competitive eSports in the 2010s.

A second round of console wars in the 2000s pitted the PlayStation 2 against the Nintendo GameCube and a new contender from Microsoft, the Xbox

Powering up

In 2013 Sony and Microsoft released their most powerful consoles ever—the Xbox One and the PlayStation 4. With revolutionised graphics, games such as "The Last of Us" and "Uncharted" offered players cinematic experiences.

Sony and Microsoft are about to go head to head again with their latest offerings,

the PlayStation 5 (pictured) and the Xbox Series X

The next generation

Sony and Microsoft are about to go head to head again with their latest offerings, the PlayStation 5 and Xbox Series X, promising never-before-seen graphics and a range of exclusive titles as battle lines are drawn.

Facing stiff competition from PC gaming and changing habits among players, whichever pricey new console emerges victorious will truly have to live up to the hype.

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