

Nolan Bushnell

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Nolan Bushnell, the founder of Atari and the pioneer of the video game industry, had a vision of creating a high-tech entertainment hub that combined arcade games, pizza, and animatronic robots (Edwards, 2017). He launched his first Pizza Time Theatre in 1977, featuring a cigar-smoking rat named Chuck E. Cheese as the mascot and leader of a musical band of robotic characters (Robots, pizza, and magic, 2017). His venture was an ambitious experiment in sensory overload, catering to both kids and adults who craved novelty and fun. This paper will examine how Bushnell applied the concepts of creative task, strategies, and breakthrough, as explained by Robert Greene in *Mastery*, to overcome the challenges and failures he faced in his entrepreneurial journey (Greene). It will also compare his story with that of Jean-Francois Champollion, the French scholar who cracked the code of the Rosetta Stone and unlocked the secrets of ancient Egypt. Both men shared a passion for their fields, a willingness to learn from others, and a determination to solve problems that seemed impossible.

“Bushnell’s innovative approach can be likened to Greene’s concept of ‘the creative task’ where one is propelled by an intrinsic motivation that transcends conventional boundaries” (Krantz, 2018). His ability to amalgamate distinct pieces of knowledge mirrors Champollion’s synthesis of linguistic expertise to decode ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics.

The Creative Active Phase

Creative Task

Nolan Bushnell revolutionized the field of digital entertainment by creating some of the most iconic arcade games ever, such as Pong and Breakout. He exemplified the principles of creative task and mastery, as outlined by Robert Greene in *Mastery*, in his pursuit of innovation and excellence. His creative task was to fuse his love of games with his expertise in engineering and electronics, and to invent new ways of engaging and entertaining a large audience. He basically invented digital entertainment. He never stopped trying new things, learning from his mistakes, and responding to the market demand. He also nurtured and guided young talents, such as Steve Jobs, who would go on to become masters. Bushnell once said, *“The best way to predict the future is to invent it.”* He lived up to his words by creating a new industry and inspiring generations of game developers.

Creative Strategy

Bushnell’s creative strategy was anchored in negative capability and the practice of altering his perspective. Negative capability refers to the capacity to embrace uncertainty, mystery, and ambiguity without rushing to conventional interpretations. Bushnell exemplified this trait; he was a curious soul, unafraid of the unknown, and always ready to challenge established norms. His creativity wasn’t hampered by his ego or emotions; instead, he was guided by intuition and a fervent passion.

Altering perspective involves viewing scenarios from varied angles and being attentive to both present elements and absent components while envisioning future possibilities. Bushnell mastered this by immersing himself in diverse fields like engineering, art, psychology, music, and science fiction. His extensive travels allowed him insights into various cultures and lifestyles worldwide. These eclectic experiences fueled his ability to devise games that were not only innovative but also resonated with a broad spectrum of players.

According to Greene (2012), these two elements of Bushnell's creative strategy are essential for achieving mastery in any field. He wrote, "Cultivate Negative Capability: Learn to endure and embrace mysteries and uncertainties. Allow for Serendipity: Move outside your normal realm of comfort and interest, explore far and wide, while staying open and avoiding jumping to conclusions. Let yourself be surprised and discover new opportunities" (p. 182). He also advised, "Alter Your Perspective: Look at the world from as many angles as possible, question all of your assumptions, and never grow complacent with what you know" (p. 191). Nolan would embody these traits.

Creative Breakthrough

Nolan had a vision of creating a new form of digital entertainment that combined his love of games and technology. He faced many failures before he achieved his creative breakthrough, which was inspired by a computer game called *Spacewar!* that he saw at a university lab. He hired a young engineer named Al Alcorn and gave him the challenge of creating a prototype. Alcorn created Pong, a simple but addictive game of table tennis. Bushnell tested the game in a local bar, where it became a sensation. He quickly began to mass-produce Pong machines and distribute them to arcades and bars nationwide. Atari became a huge success and inspired many competitors.

Bushnell's creative breakthrough resulted from several factors: he had a deep knowledge of his field, he was open to new ideas and influences, he experimented with different possibilities, he adapted to the feedback he received, and he had a vision of what he wanted to achieve. He followed the principles of creative breakthrough as explained by Robert Greene in *Mastery* (Greene, 2012). He also applied his creativity to other ventures, such as Pizza Time Theatre (Chuck E. Cheese), a restaurant chain that featured animatronic characters and arcade

games. He was always looking for new ways to entertain and delight his customers. He learned about the concept of “flow” from a book by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (Chafkin, 2009) and adopted some of the principles of Zen Buddhism, such as simplicity, intuition, and detachment, which helped him cope with the stress and uncertainty of his work (Krantz, 2018).

Emotional Pitfall

Nolan Bushnell had a vision of creating new digital entertainment with games and technology. He failed many times before he created Pong, a simple but addictive game of table tennis. Pong was a hit and Atari became a huge success. But Bushnell’s success also made him grandiose. He overestimated his abilities and lost touch with reality. He became arrogant and reckless, and made costly mistakes. According to Chafkin (2009), he rejected the Apple II computer, and launched Androbot, a failed robot venture. Androbot cost him \$60 million and nearly bankrupted him. He lost Atari to Warner Communications and was fired. He tried other businesses, but none succeeded. He had to sell his assets and live modestly.

Bushnell’s story shows how grandiosity can blind us and make us lose our goals. It also shows how mastery needs learning, humility, and self-awareness. Greene (2012) wrote, “The greatest danger you face is your mind growing soft and your eye getting dull” (p. 159).

Cross-Comparison: Nolan Bushnell and Jean-Francois Champollion

Dimensional thinking, as explained by Robert Greene in his book *Mastery*, is the skill of seeing reality from different angles, questioning the established norms, and finding creative links among diverse fields. It is a key to achieving mastery in any domain, by broadening one’s scope and discovering new opportunities.

Nolan Bushnell and Jean-Francois Champollion are two examples of masters who applied dimensional thinking to their fields. Bushnell, the founder of Atari and the video game industry, combined his passion for games and technology to create a new form of digital entertainment. Champollion, the decipherer of Egyptian hieroglyphs and a founding figure in Egyptology, combined his talents in linguistics, history, and archaeology to unlock the secrets of ancient Egypt. They both overcame obstacles and difficulties in their pursuit of mastery, such as technical challenges, political turmoil, or academic rivalry. They were both curious, persistent, and visionary, and they left a lasting legacy for future generations. Greene (2012) describes their stories and achievements in his book and highlights the importance of dimensional thinking for mastering any field.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Nolan Bushnell achieved mastery in the field of video game design and revolutionized digital entertainment by following his curiosity, experimenting with different ideas, and learning from his failures. He applied the principles of Mastery, such as finding his creative task, strategy, and breakthroughs. He also combined his knowledge of engineering, psychology, and business to create innovative and engaging games that revolutionized the industry. Nolan Bushnell is an example of how mastery can be attained by pursuing one's passion and adapting to changing circumstances.

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