

NOLAN BUSHNELL

INTERVIEW BY JOSHUA LURIE ★ ILLUSTRATION BY ANTONY HARE

Nolan Bushnell is widely acknowledged as the “Father of the Video Game Industry,” a visionary responsible for Atari and Chuck E. Cheese’s Pizza Time Theater. He’s also about to be the subject of an upcoming bio-pic, played by Leonardo DiCaprio. The serial entrepreneur recently launched a new concept with son Brent called uWink. The restaurant and bar has a touch screen terminal built into each table where you can order food and drinks, and play social games that are designed to increase conversation and interaction. The first location opened at the Westfield Promenade in Woodland Hills in November 2006. In June, uWink launched on the third floor of Hollywood & Highland, which is where we met.

NA: After so many successful ventures, what drives you to launch new concepts? Because they need to be done. I think the kind of stuff I do is about making the future happen sooner.

NA: What was it that first captivated you about technology? Technology gave you power to manipulate your environment and to manipulate various things. It was empowering.

NA: What was your first exposure to technology growing up? Miss Cook’s third grade class, where I got to play with the science box. The science box was given to one student to teach the class about something, and I got electricity. That night, after I did that in Miss Cook’s third grade class, I set up the card table in the corner of my bedroom and went around the house and got every old flashlight, battery, switch and piece of wire, started tinkering, and I never stopped.

NA: Do you have any mentors? Several. My first mentor was a guy named Chet Ashby, a ham radio operator down the street who I used to pester about things electronic, starting probably at 9, going on until probably 15. When I was working for Lagoon [Amusement Park in Farmington, Utah], a guy named Bob Freed. I always thought that I got my MBA from him, because he taught me a lot about managing a business and managing people. I always had a lot of respect for Walt Disney and the way he used technology.

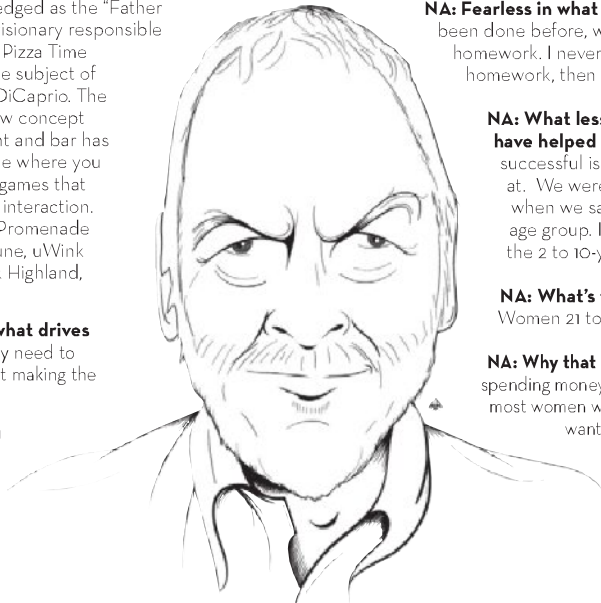
NA: How was it that he impacted you? I always thought that Disneyland was the coolest amusement park in the world. Of course I was fascinated with animatronic characters, which I ultimately emulated with Chuck E. Cheese, and just the fact that technology could be empowered to give people a good time.

NA: Do you still think that Disneyland is the coolest theme park in the world? Yeah, probably. It’s not as good as it should be. I can think of a million things I’d do if I ran Disney to make the parks really pop. They’re making a lot of money, so they don’t feel the need.

NA: What’s one thing you’d like to see there? They could do a lot better job in interactive entertainment. Almost all their rides are ride through, see, look, and I just think that’s old school. Today’s world is about interacting with your environment.

NA: What characteristics have helped to make you so successful as a serial entrepreneur? I’m a little bit of chameleon. If I need to be a businessman in New York, I can wear a suit and tie. If I need to talk to engineers, I can sit cross-legged on the floor and talk tech. I think that helps. More than that, I’m very ambitious. I work very hard.

NA: How do you consistently stay ahead of the curve when it comes to ideas and technology? I’m constantly questioning, looking for new things that I think make sense. They’re out there, and I’m in a position where I can see them. I can actualize them and make it happen. I’m somewhat fearless.



NA: Fearless in what ways? I’m willing to try things that have never been done before, which scares the hell out of a lot of people. I do my homework. I never do anything rash. I’m careful, but once I’ve done my homework, then I’m fearless.

NA: What lessons did you learn from Chuck E. Cheese’s that have helped shape uWink? One of the things that makes Chuck E. successful is we really knew the demographic that we were looking at. We were really relentless, much to the chagrin of parents, when we said we’re going to do a really good job with the 2 to 10 age group. If it’s something that 2 to 10 like, but parents don’t like, the 2 to 10-year-olds are going to win. It’s worked.

NA: What’s the demographic that you’re targeting with uWink? Women 21 to 35.

NA: Why that demographic? Because it’s very safe. There’s a lot of spending money in that demographic. If you hit that demographic, then most women who are over 35 want to be 35. Most girls who are under 21 want to be 21. If you pull 21-year-old girls, you’ve got all the guys in the world, so it’s kind of a no-brainer.

NA: What were you hoping to achieve with Atari, and do you feel like you accomplished it? Selling Atari was a massive blunder on my part. Rather than Warner destroying Atari, I thought it would be very helpful with ideas and providing capital, and they just did the opposite. They basically bit-by-bit destroyed Atari.

NA: Do you regret selling it? Massively.

NA: What were some lessons that you learned from that experience that you think will help with uWink? Take the company public. Take vacation. Don’t get too tired. Atari was very difficult to run, because we never had enough money. I jumped at a way to reward all that hard work.

NA: What appealed to you about coming to Hollywood for your second uWink? The first one is in the suburbs. I wanted to see a go-go location in the middle of hip and beautiful people... There are consistently interesting things that happen here.

NA: Chuck E. Cheese’s isn’t exactly known for their food. What did you do to make sure that adults will enjoy eating at uWink? Understand that Chuck E. Cheese has the best food possible for their targeted demographic... The target audience is 2 to 10, and they like pizzas that are pretty bland... With that, once you decide you’re going to go for 21 to 35-year-old females, they’re a lot fussier. You have to have a vegetarian menu. You have to have things that are really well done, and you have to have a tremendous amount of customization, because every girl wants it their way. We give them that in spades.

NA: Other than the iPhone [which is on the table], what are some other technologies that you use every day? I have both PCs and Apples on my desk... I’ve got Pleo, the robot dinosaur. You pet it and it squirms and you feed it a leaf. I just love robotics... I’m [also] on Facebook.

NA: What are your biggest concerns about the current state of gaming, and how does uWink help to address those concerns? Games need to be more social. They can be isolating. Some people think that being in your basement in your boxer shorts at 3 a.m. is social, and I don’t. I think that being here with friends, laughing and joking, that’s social. I’m concerned. I think games are a little too addictive right now. There are a lot of young people who are throwing their future away right now playing video games. A couple hours a day is okay, but when it comes up to six or seven or eight hours a day, that’s clearly excessive and not helping.

NA: What do you think are some possible solutions for that? A 10-step program. Video Games Anonymous. Anything that is powerful can be addictive, and I’m concerned about it. At home, parents should intervene. [NA](#)