

A TRIBUTE TO TED DABNEY

On May 26, 2018, the world lost one of its videogame pioneers. On that day, Ted Dabney, the co-founder of Atari, passed away at the age of 81 after a short bout with esophagus cancer.

Unlike his partner, Nolan Bushnell, Ted's name wasn't a household one, even within the videogame industry. While a story about Apple would never mention either of the Steve's as the company's sole founder, those about Atari usually only mentioned Bushnell's name. And for the longest time, Ted didn't even care. He had left the videogame industry a long time ago, selling his stake in Atari to Bushnell, because he couldn't stand working with the guy.

Although I did know who Ted Dabney was, I wasn't actually introduced to him until around 2007, and the introduction came from the most unlikely of people. It was Ralph Baer who gave me Ted's personal information, and he suggested that I should contact Ted and write an article about him. When I did get in touch with Ted, he wasn't so receptive about an article. At that time he was living in a remote area of Washington and was far removed from the videogame industry. His work with Nolan Bushnell had left a sour taste in his mouth, and after he sold Bushnell his portion of Atari, he simply moved on and never

looked back. Fortunately he finally relinquished his disappointment of the past and we began corresponding in earnest, via email, phone and Skype. I think the turning point of when we actually became friends when I asked him if he knew about the movie about Nolan Bushnell that Leonardo DiCaprio's production company, Appian Way, prepared to make. Ted hadn't heard about it and he was hurt that they hadn't contacted him. I offered to intercede in his behalf. I called the production company and suggest that they contact Ted but they didn't seem to be interested. The movie, which Bushnell had script approval, was eventually shelved.

My article about Ted was published in the April, 2009 issue of the British magazine, *Edge*, its 200th issue. Nine years earlier I had written an article about the forgotten Ralph Baer, which was published in *Electronic Gaming Monthly*. After it was published, a new generation of gamers learned who Ralph was and before long he was inaugurated into hall of fames and receiving prestigious awards. I was hoping the same magic would fall on Ted. Unfortunately, it didn't.

Initially, Ted had no interest in being in the limelight. In 2009 I had invited him to talk to an audience at Classic Gaming Expo via Skype. Ralph Baer already had agreed to do it and I was hoping to have them virtually on stage together. But Ted wouldn't have any of that. He didn't feel anyone would be

interested and he had no desire to do so. He eventually gave in but not to me. In 2010, Marty Goldberg, the co-author of *Atari Inc.: Business Is Fun*, and co-organizer of the Midwest Gaming Classic, got Ted to appear via Skype at that year's MGC. Finally Ted agreed to appear at the 2012 CGE through Skype but the room where the panels were to be held didn't have Wi-Fi, so the idea was scrapped.

Around that time, I asked Ted to write a Foreword for the new edition of my book *Phoenix*. He was more than happy to do it but the piece he delivered was very short. Rather than ask him for more, I asked journalist Chris Koehler to write a second Foreword, which he did right away. However, because the book was delayed for such a long time, I asked both men if they wanted to make any changes to what they wrote. Both did. Unfortunately the piece that Ted returned to be was a long diatribe on Bushnell. I couldn't use it and never mentioned that to Ted.

After that Ted and I talked on the phone often and I will miss those calls. I always felt guilty when I called because I was on the east coast and he was on the west coast and I usually called him at 7:30 in the morning - my time! But he assured me that he and wife were always up very early. Still, his wife, Carolyn always sounded surprised when she answered the phone that early. But then after Ted got on the line and said with a long hearty "Lenny!", all my guilt dissipated.

Ted was always cheerful when we talked. Even when a wildfire destroyed his house in 2016, he remained cheerful, even though he was unsure if the insurance company was going to pay him enough to buy a new house. I set up a YouFundMe drive for him. However, within a few days of launching it, Ted told me that the insurance company was paying enough and the YouFundMe wasn't needed. But he was very grateful to the people who contributed.

In January of this year, Ted broke the news to me that he had esophageal cancer and had less than a year to live. I was speechless. Still he retained his wonderful disposition and sense of humor. And he told me that no matter what, he had a great life and had no regrets. He would say that several times to me over the next few months.

In 2017, my friend Alexander Smith was told that the Smithsonian was creating an archive videogame pioneers and they wanted to interview Ted. He asked me to check with Ted. I did and he was interested but it didn't proceed. After I announced on Facebook that he had an aggressive form of cancer, Alexander approached me again. I once again asked Ted if he was interested and he said sure. Then one day in March he called me and was totally excited. The crew was there and they had interviewed him for nine hours! For the first time, he was beginning to realize the impact he made on so many people's lives. He was so happy

about this. And I was happy that I played a small role in making this happen.

Shortly afterwards he said to me that Nolan Bushnell still owed him money for work he had done at Chuck E. Cheese. With his inflation, Ted reckoned that the amount today was \$85,000. I joked to him that he should write an invoice and I'd post it on Facebook. To my surprise, he did create an invoice and sent it to me. But I never posted it.

After the success with the Smithsonian, my buddy, Rob Faraldi, suggested that we should fly out to Ted's house and he would record Ted and I just sitting together and schmoozing about whatever came to mind. I thought that this was an excellent idea and I knew Ted would be on board with it. I called him up and imagined him saying, "Sure, love to have you here." But that wasn't what I heard. What I heard was Ted slurring his words, and at times I couldn't understand him. He said he was having a bad day. He had good days and bad days and there was no way to tell when they would come and go. Although I would have loved to see Ted, I couldn't see flying across the country and then driving two hours and find him having a bad day. I never told him about the plan.

But one thing I will always remember about Ted. No matter how bad a day he was having when I called, he always said my calls made him feel better.

On May 2, I called Ted to wish him a happy 81st birthday. As always he was his cheerful self and happy to hear from me. Of course there was an elephant on the line that neither of us discussed. That elephant was that this would most likely be his last birthday. During that call he told me that he sent Nolan Bushnell a letter, hoping that they could meet, but Nolan never responded. Ted suspected that he didn't have Nolan's correct address. I told him I would take care of it and after I got off the phone I texted Tyler Bushnell, Nolan's son, and told him that Ted was dying and would like to see Nolan one last time. Tyler got back to me right away requesting Ted's phone number and email address. He sent that to Nolan and Nolan contacted Ted immediately. The two made plans for Nolan to visit him this summer. Ted was skeptical about this happening because he didn't know if he would last until the summer. Unfortunately he was right about that.

On May 11 I had dinner with Mark Baer, Ralph's son, and I told him that Ted was dying. Mark told me that his father had nothing but good things to say about Ted. I called Ted on May 14 to let him know this and he said the same, that he had nothing but good things to say about Ralph. And that was the last time we had spoken.

I had planned to call Ted on May 29 but I wasn't going to call blindly like I always did. This time I was going to email

him first and ask if he was feeling well enough for me to call him. Unfortunately I never got the chance. I learned three days earlier that Ted succumbed to his disease. And even though I knew that it was going to happen eventually, the news still hit me like a lightning bolt.

I have been blessed to have close relationships with two of the most instrumental players in videogame history. I still think of Ralph Baer daily, 3½ years after his passing. I suspect I will be doing the same with Ted Dabney.