Before the Games 1889-1970

1889
Fusajiro Yamauchi establishes the Marufuku Company to manufacture and distribute Hanafuda, Japanese playing cards. In 1907, Marufuku begins manufacturing Western playing cards. The company changes its name to The Nintendo Playing Card Company in 1951. "Nintendo" means "leave luck to heaven."

1891
Gerard Philips establishes a company in the Netherlands to manufacture incandescent lamps and other electrical products.

1918
Konosuke Matsushita establishes the Matsushita Electric Housewares Manufacturing Works. During the next 70 years, the company will establish a multitude of companies, including Panasonic.

1932
The Connecticut Leather Company is established by a Russian immigrant named Maurice Greenberg to distribute leather products to shoemakers. In the early '50s, Maurice's son Leonard creates a leather-cutting machine, and the company, which soon trades under the acronym COLECO (short for Connecticut Leather Company), begins selling leather craft kits. By the end of the decade, Leonard will have built a plastic-forming machine, and the company will have jumped into the plastic-wading-pool industry.

1945
From their garage workshop, Harold Matson and Elliot Handler produce picture frames. They come up with the name "Mattel" by combining letters from their names. Elliot uses the scraps from the picture frames to begin a side business making doll-house furniture.

1947
Akio Morita and Masaru Ibuka set up the Tokyo Telecommunications Engineering Company. After seeing an American-made tape recorder, Morita decides his company should begin making them. In 1952, Ibuka and Morita barely raise the $25,000 fee to become one of the first foreign companies to license the transistor patent from Bell Labs. They then use the transistor to create the world's first pocket-sized battery-powered radio. The transistor radio is a success in Japan, and Ibuka and Morita begin looking at marketing their products in the United States and Europe. Realizing the English translation of their company name is too cumbersome for English-speaking people to remember, they modify the Latin word sonus (sound) and come up with Sony, a word that has no meaning, for their new corporate name.

1951
Ralph Baer, an engineer with Loral, a company that develops and manufactures complex military airborne electronics, is instructed to "build the best TV set in the world." Baer suggests they add some kind of interactive game to the TV set to distinguish it from other companies' TVs, but management ignores the idea.

1954
Former US Korean War veteran David Rosen sees the popularity of mechanical coin-operated games on US military bases in Japan, so he starts Service Games to export these games to Japan. In the 1960s, Rosen decides to make his own coin-operated games, so he purchases a Tokyo jukebox and slot-machine company. The name SEGA, short for SErvice GAmes, is stamped on the games that Rosen produces, and eventually Rosen adopts it as his company name.

1958
In an effort to keep visitors to the Brookhaven National Laboratories in New York from being bored, physicist Willy Higinbotham invents an interactive table-tennis-like game that is displayed on an oscilloscope. He improves on his invention a year later by displaying it on a 15-inch monitor. Believing that he hasn't invented anything, Higinbotham doesn't patent the device.

1961
MIT student Steve Russell creates Spacewar, the first interactive computer game, on a Digital PDP-1 (Programmed Data Processor-1) mainframe computer. Limited by the computer technology of the time, ASCII text characters are the "graphics," and people can only play the game on a device that takes up the floor space of a small house.

1962
Nolan Bushnell enrolls in engineering school at the University of Utah, where he is first exposed to Russell's Spacewar.

Spacewar

1965
Nolan Bushnell gets a summer job at a Salt Lake City carnival where he is in charge of the arcade. Bushnell envisions an arcade filled with computer games but realizes it's only a dream, since computers are much too expensive to make the idea feasible.

1966
Ralph Baer rekindles his idea for a secondary use for television sets. He begins researching interactive television games. The defense contractor he works for, Sanders Associates, is interested and gives him the latitude needed to develop it.

1967
Baer and his team succeed in creating an interactive game that can be played on a television screen. They develop a chase game and follow it up with a video tennis game. They also modify a toy gun so it can distinguish spots of light on the screen.

1968
Baer's interactive TV game is patented.

1970
Magnavox licenses Baer's TV game from Sanders Associates.

With the help of Ted Dabney, Bushnell turns his daughter Britta's bedroom into a workshop so they can build an arcade version of Spacewar. They succeed in putting together a hardwired dedicated machine that can hook up to a television set to play a video version of Spacewar. Bushnell calls his game Computer Space.

Arcade-game manufacturer Nutting Associates purchases Computer Space and hires Bushnell to oversee the building of it.