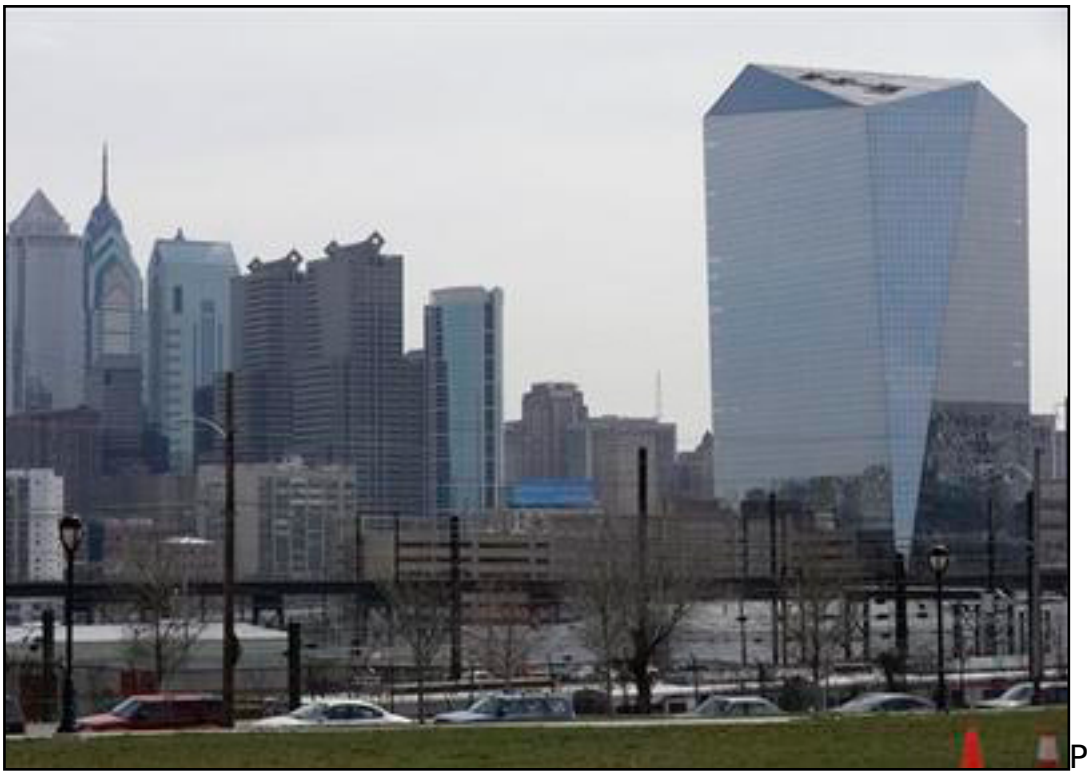
Philadelphia gets ready to play 'Pong' on building

KATHY MATHESON, Associated Press



PHILADELPHIA (AP) -- Philadelphia is getting ready for a supersized game of "Pong" - on the side of a skyscraper.

The classic Atari video game will be re-created later this month on the facade of the 29-story Cira Centre, where hundreds of embedded LED lights will replicate the familiar paddles and ball.

Organizers expect hundreds of onlookers as gaming enthusiasts use giant, table-mounted joysticks to play from afar. The players will be standing on the steps of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, a site that offers an unobstructed view of the office building from across the Schuylkill River.

"`Pong' is a cultural icon, cultural milestone," said Frank Lee, the Drexel University game-design professor behind the concept. "This is my love letter to the wonders of technology as seen through the eyes of my childhood."

Despite the buzz the idea has received since being announced Wednesday, Lee said it took five years to find people willing to make it happen. He eventually met kindred spirits at Brandywine Realty Trust, which owns the Cira Centre, and at the online news site Technically Philly.

Now, what might be the world's largest "Pong" game will be played April 19 and 24 as part of Philly Tech Week, the news website's annual series of events, seminars

and workshops spotlighting the city's technology and innovation communities.

"This is one of the best things I could imagine that could make people aware that there's something happening here, and bring more people into the fold," Technically Philly co-founder Christopher Wink said.

Wink estimated about 150 people might play over the two days - most will be chosen by a lottery, but some spots will be reserved for younger students enrolled in science, technology, engineering and math programs.

Among those playing will be 36-year-old Brad Denenberg, one of three winners picked at random during a Tech Week preview on Wednesday. Denenberg, who runs the tech startup incubator Seed Philly, confessed to some trepidation. He said he's actually not a big gamer.

"My biggest fear is that I'm going to play against some 8-year-old who will destroy me," Denenberg said.

In today's gaming era of lifelike graphics - think "Call of Duty" - and colorful characters - think "Angry Birds" - it's hard to imagine how the pixelated "Pong" qualified as revolutionary when it was introduced in 1972.

The black-and-white arcade game used simple block shapes to simulate two paddles and a ball; the object was for players to hit the ball so their opponents could not return it. A home version paved the way for the game console industry.

At the Cira Centre, the game will be re-created using hundreds of lights already embedded in its north face. The tower stands by day as a gleaming, mirrored edifice in west Philadelphia, but each night it illuminates the skyline with colored, patterned displays. A spokesman could not be reached for comment Thursday.

Lee said he was driving by the building one night five years ago when he was suddenly struck with the idea that the lights could be configured to play the shape-fitting game Tetris.

The concept grew from there. Last month, after finally securing the necessary permissions, he and two colleagues successfully tested giant versions of "Pong" as well as the classic games "Snake" and "Space Invaders." People might get to play "Snake" on April 24, Lee said.

The effort has been satisfying on a technical level, Lee said, describing "Pong" as "a large-scale interactive, light-based art project."

But he noted it was rewarding on an emotional level as well, comparing it with the excitement he felt as a boy when he would put the "Pong" game cartridge into the console. And he hopes it inspires a new generation of innovators.

"I hope kids ... will go on to be the leaders, and push technology forward and do wondrous things in the future," Lee said.

Online:

http://ph.ly/pong [1]

http://phillytechweek.com/ [2]

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