In May 1978 Atari released yet another 'top down racer'. It was called 'Firetruck'. It had a catchy, short, memorable name. It featured an interesting subject for a lot of youngsters. It was new idea. It was different. It had an interesting cabinet. It was, sadly, only marginally successful. Despite being an original game, interesting cabinet and concept, nothing but nothing in 1978 arcades could escape the tall shadow of that Goliath game Space Invaders.

But Firetruck is noted here for another reason. It was the first racing game to offer two player simultaneous cooperative play. There was a further one player version named 'Smokey Joe'. The task was simple. Race up the screen and avoid things. Doing this for longer and faster meant more points and a better rating at the end of the (usually brief) game. But it was the number of items, and the way it was executed that made it a remarkable game. For instance, there was a 'difficulty' choice, the game code was sizeable (more varied graphics), there was plenty of (mono) sound effects and the two players both had horn or bell to sound. One player sat in the drivers chair and the second player who also had a wheel stood up behind. One steered the front of the cab and the other steered the rear. Sadly, despite colour tv being available they were seldom utilised in games at this point in time and it was a black and white monitor. At the heart of this creation was a Motorola 1Mhz 6800 CPU—commercially available since late 1974 and rarely used in games. The Z80 from Zilog would soon take over.

It was a tough game to play (very tough) and the game rated you after your game time had expired. Anyone reaching beyond the 'goal' points would be playing the game in inverted video. Whilst tough to play, it was no doubt a tough game to engineer and build as well. It was engineered by Howard Delman who joined Atari in July 1976. Prior to this he'd programmed a few less complicated games, which included 'superbug' a top down street racer of little significance.

Howard Delman?

Howard was a hardware wizard at Atari. He created the hardware which allowed him to develop Lunar Lander (1978—the first vector graphics game from Atari). The same hardware was used for Asteroids (1979) and the quite stunning Battlezone (1980)

Asteroids and Firetruck share one technological wonder:the audio was quite simply amazing for their day. In particular on Firetruck the 'skid' sound is terrific, and only occurs when the truck goes into massive oversteer and starts to jack-knife. Asteroids audio was somewhat immersive and tension built as the game level progressed.