

Where's the River?

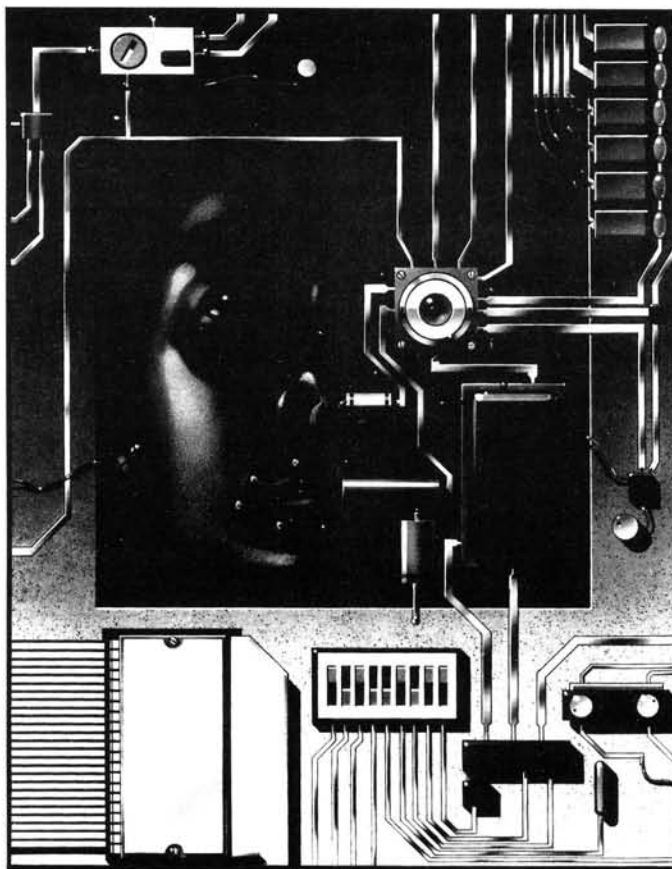
Somewhere in the timeless depths of the mid-1960's somebody wrote the first computer game. Within 24 hours of this earth-shaking event, somebody else declared it to be a waste of time, electricity and gray matter.

As I chronicled in "The Dark Ages of Game Design" (CGW #28, p. 12), the game designers of the pre-Apple II days were hobbyists. We hoped to reach a small audience of fellow gamers around the country who, like us, used the late-night "off-peak" hours to sneak in their game playing. In our school, this was necessitated by the fact that until games were kicked off the system, they were eating over 50% of the computer time many weekends. After they were kicked off they were impermissible and blasphemous, and academic computing was once again pure.

The advent of the Apple II in the late '70's gave designers the freedom to work on dedicated machines where no one could tell us that gaming was forbidden. *Apple Trek*, *Wumpus*, *Eliza*, *Adventure*, *Rogue* and *Zork* all came from mainframe games that made the transition to micros. It should be noted that only in the case of *Zork* did the designers have the foresight to maintain control of their brainchild and successfully exploit it creatively and commercially.

Not all of us were so insightful. In the mid-seventies I had a fully-functioning fantasy role-playing game on the PDP-10, with both ranged and melee combat, lines of sight, auto-mapping and NPC's with discrete AI. When I bought my Apple, I went back to all my old designs to pick the most promising one to convert . . . and ignored my FRP.

Over the River and Through the Woods:



The Changing Role of Computer Game Designers

By Don L. Daglow

Like I say, give the *Zork* guys credit.

This is the River and I Think We're All Wet

By the summer of 1980, **Mattel** realized that the *Intellivision* video game's success wasn't a single-season affair and set out to hire an in-house game design team. I was lucky enough to be one of the original five programmers hired for

that team and eventually ended up as Director of Game Design for *Intellivision*. I sure as hell didn't know what I was getting myself into, though.

Picture a building converted from an old *Hot Wheels* factory with a second floor added to the interior to hold the game designers—who grew to a staff 110 strong. Look across its expanses and your eyes would scan a seemingly endless sea of cubicles beneath a corrugated metal roof and exposed air conditioning conduits. The walls and ceilings were painted white, the cubicles a consistent gray. There were no windows. It was the Big Company style. It was hardly a creative environment.

Within that environment, however, were some of the most talented game designers you'd ever want to meet. My own team included: Eddie Dombrower, the designer of *Earl Weaver Baseball*; Rick Koenig, author of *Racing Destruction Set* and *Ferrari Formula I*; Connie Goldman, who did graphics for Rick's projects and for *Adventure Construction Set*; and Dave Warhol, whose music and sound effects have graced products from several major publishers. There were several other real talents who, discouraged by the Cartridge Crash of '83, left the business for safer shores.

Life on our white and gray floor went on in a high-security environment. Guards at the front door checked for properly coded security badges. An additional electronic card key was necessary to enter the game design area. This had the effect of cutting us off from almost all outside input, leaving us in an ivory tower where our only contact was with

(Continued on page 42)

Over The River

(Continued from page 18)

each other and whomever we could talk to in local stores. It was not a good way to keep a finger on the pulse of the market.

Senior executives made periodic forays to check on our progress, wandering from cubicle to cubicle to look at games. Some were pleasant and made reasonable comments. Others were petty and dictatorial ("That background ought to be blue. Change it."). In the end the dictator types had less impact than the others, since they never played the games anyway and thus, had no idea whether their orders had been carried out. Nevertheless, I spent a great deal of time talking my best designers out of quitting after being the targets of such visits.

The cartridge era had four distinct periods, each with its implications for game designers. The first period, from 1978-1981, was the time of the Obvious Design of the Obvious Product. The proper route for a design was a straight one: show the action, tally the score. Sports games were the biggest sellers, largely because buyers knew what they were getting before they opened the package.

Game designers of the time worked for big companies (**Atari, Mattel**), drew average programmer salaries (but not royalties), and didn't have their names on the products. Management regarded their programming skills as the source of their value and game design was often snorted at as an illusory talent: "Anybody coulda made that baseball game, but I was the one who said we oughta do it."

The second era, which ran from 1981-82, centered on the conversion of the latest coin-op hits to the home machines. The speed of development now became absolutely critical, so a game would be ready for the home while it was still hot in the arcades.

The most visible symptom of that rush was the VCS version of *Pac-Man*, a cartridge awaited with such passion and rushed to market so hurriedly that over 1,000,000 copies were sold in the first few months of its life. Unfortunately, the game was released before its time and featured ghosts and a Pac Man that flickered irritatingly and game play that didn't feel balanced. The game's sales ground to a halt as its bad reputation

spread by word of mouth, and Atari had to absorb huge losses on returns. Score one for quality.

Ironically, it was during the third era, a brief time in 1982-83, that game designers finally began to get some of their just rewards. There is a story (perhaps apocryphal) that *Pac-Man* was finished at all only because of a special mid-project "arrangement" for programmer royalties. The success of **Activision** after being founded by four former Atari game designers (including Alan Miller and Bob Whitehead, who later left to found **Accolade**) led Atari, Mattel and Coleco to take a second look at how they handled their creative staffs.

Royalties of the time were in most cases minuscule, but they nonetheless began being paid. Names of designers began to appear in small print on the backs of packages and in manuals. In fact, the companies began working overtime to recruit the best ones away from their competitors.

Nevertheless, before the industry could really mature, new voices sounded the coming in 1983-84 of the fourth era—and the cartridges' death knell. Dazzled by the success of **Atari, Mattel, Coleco** and **Activision**, hordes of imitators jumped into the market. **Quaker Oats** even founded a video game subsidiary! In late 1982, the number of cartridges manufactured by all these companies far outstripped the demand. Many of the games were absolutely awful, but retailers, riding a 3-year sales burst, kept ordering everything anyway.

Christmas, 1982 was a disappointment and by early 1983, the game-playing public had made the choices which the manufacturers had refused to make. Many of the games still sat on store shelves. Returns started rolling back in to the publishers. Several companies went under rapidly: **Games by Apollo, Fox Videogames, U.S. Games** and others.

Further, once they were bankrupt, they could no longer take returns from the stores. Retailers cut their losses by cutting their prices and the \$4.95 specials we still see today appeared in a marketplace where normal prices had averaged \$35. Surviving publishers with large inventories started selling better games at bargain prices to cut their losses. The \$35 carts looked overpriced by comparison, and even the best games' sales slowed to a crawl as the \$5 specials swallowed all remaining demand. More bankruptcies followed, and Atari, Mattel and Coleco disbanded their game design staffs.

The first Cartridge Wars were over.

(I'm sure you've noticed that I've made no reference to the Nintendo craze that has repeated the Atari and Mattel Phenomenon of 8 years ago. That's because for American game designers the Nintendo is a non-event: virtually all the work to date has been done in Japan. Only the future will tell if the design process ever crosses the Pacific as efficiently as the container ships and the letters of credit now do.)

How Deep are the Woods?

While the big companies publishing Coin-Op Conversions and sports games were dominating the cartridge world, small companies like **Sirius, Broderbund, Infocom, Automated Simulations, SSI, On-Line Systems** and others were quietly building the home computer game market.

Instead of large in-house staffs, these companies usually combined a few game designers who were employees (often the founders themselves) with a group of external programmers. These independent designers had the same relationship with the game companies that book authors have with traditional publishers: they submitted their games for consideration, the publisher chose the good ones, and the authors were paid a royalty.

Authors' names appeared prominently on these game packages long before the practice infiltrated the cartridge world. Names of that early era like Bill Budge (*Raster Blaster*), Dan Bunten (*Computer Quarterback*), Chris Crawford (*Eastern Front 1941*), Jon Freeman (*Temple of Apshai*), Dan Gorlin (*Choplifter*) and Doug Smith (*Lode Runner*) became familiar to gamers and were associated with quality products. Many of those same designers continue as leaders of our industry today.

From 1978-82 most of the notoriety outside the computer game world went to the cartridge games. Yet, today's industry is directly based on the structure that was evolving in the disk-based world at the same time, the world which *Computer Gaming World* chose to cover when it first appeared in 1981.

The small publishers succeeded where Atari, Mattel and Coleco had failed, and a key element in that success was, and is, their view of "Computer Game Designers" as special individuals with unique talents who are worthy of all our respect. I can think of no more appropriate conclusion to reach in an article to honor the fiftieth issue of *Computer Gaming World*.