

In 1982, Jim Levy rewarded his hard-working employees by taking the entire company (along with their spouses or "spouse equivalents") to the island of Maui for four days. It was there that the famed Beach Olympiad was held. The company was divided into teams named for tropical fruits, and events included sand-castle building, canoe racing, hula hooping, and the lei pass. The gold medal went to the Kumquat team (and I was a member of that team!).

Charlotte also recalled Activision's darkest day.

Skeel: No one will ever forget the big layoff on November 10, 1983. As people carried boxes of personal items to their cars, they were met by local news cameras. One individual commented to reporters, "There will never be another Activision." It was a very sad day because most of us thought of the company as sort of a modern-day Camelot, and here we were leaving it for the last time. No one will remember that day better than Jim Levy, the president of Activision at the time. It was also his birthday.

The Transitional Years: 1984 to 1987

As the video game market faded into oblivion, Activision started on the path to become a major force in the microcomputer software industry. It wasn't all fun and games during that period of the company's history, as Loretta Stagnitto, director of corporate communications, explains.

Jermaine: In December of 1984, Activision computer games took on a new appearance. Why did this happen?

Loretta Stagnitto: In terms of packaging, Activision computer entertainment products took on a different look to help distinguish the computer games from the video games, thus the "album style" was adopted. In addition, original artwork or photography was used for package displays instead of generating artwork that resembled the game screens from the video games.

Jermaine: Tell me more about what Activision was like during this period.

Stagnitto: When Activision began publishing computer entertainment titles, the strategy at the time (and prior to the diversification strategy that led to the acquisition of Gamestar and Infocom in 1985 and 1986, respectively) was to create truly innovative games. Most of the subsequent titles featured state-of-the-art graphics and sound, but they lacked depth of gameplay—an important element that can determine the success or failure of a product. Games like *Web Dimension*, *Alter Ego* and *Portal* were truly innovative, but the consumer was more interested in action-oriented, strategy games, and/or fantasy/role-playing titles. In other words, the programs weren't geared to the needs of the average user. Then the company spent a lot of money trying to convince everybody they wanted these types of programs, instead of publishing what the people really wanted. It was a very confusing time in [Activision's] history.

Jermaine: Is it true that Accolade was founded by former members of the Activision team? Why did they leave the company in the first place?

Stagnitto: In 1984 Alan Miller and Bob Whitehead, successful software designers and co-founders of Activision, thought we should be working on other forms of entertainment software. These individuals finally broke away from the company and did their own thing at their own company. Accolade was founded in December 1984, and their first product (*Hardball!*) was released in July of 1985.

Jermaine: Can you give me some information about Gamestar?

Stagnitto: Activision acquired Gamestar in January of 1985. Scott Orr stayed on to head the group, while his people created a series of popular microcomputer sports games. They include: *Star Rank Boxing I and II*, *GBA Two-on-Two Championship Basketball*, *Star League Baseball*, *GFL Championship Football*, *Pete Rose Pennant Fever* and many others. Scott Orr and his team of experts are gone, but Gamestar continues to turn out quality sports entertainment software.

The year 1984 saw the release of Ghostbusters, Activision's most popular computer game to date. Two years ago, David Crane (a founder of Activision and the program's creator) and Dick Lehrberg (Activision's vice-president of product acquisition at the time) told me how the project came together. Little did they know it was destined to become the best-selling Activision product of all time.

Jermaine: Tell me about the development of *Ghostbusters*.

Dick Lehrberg: *Ghostbusters* appealed to us for several reasons. It was a very popular movie, the subject was original, and the basic story itself provided a number of interesting elements for David Crane to work with. Columbia Pictures also contributed a great deal to the project. They were very strict when it came to approving our ideas for the program, but they worked closely with us throughout the entire project. Once the initial storyboards were completed, the rest of the approvals were fairly routine. There were no last-minute changes in our game concept.

David Crane: *Ghostbusters* was a strange project. At the time, I was in the process of creating an animated city-wide adventure. The player would be able to drive a vehicle, use a map to plot his way and add equipment to the car to give it special capabilities. This program might have evolved into a James Bond-type game if *Ghostbusters* hadn't come along.

Anyway, I had worked on this concept for several months when I took a night off to see *Ghostbusters* at a local movie theater. I really enjoyed the film. A day later, I went to work and ran into one of the people from our acquisition group. He asked me if I'd be interested in doing a *Ghostbusters* computer game.

I was truly interested in the project, but they wanted it to be completed by the end of August so the game could be released before Christmas. This was May of 1984, which gave me approximately ten weeks to develop the program. Normally I couldn't possibly program a game in that amount of time, but my new untitled creation could be adapted to fit the *Ghostbusters* storyline, so I agreed to do the project.

In the weeks that followed, I found myself attending several showings of *Ghostbusters*. Looking back, I wonder what the people thought I was doing—there I was seriously studying the movie, taking notes and drawing diagrams. Later in the project, Columbia (under strictest security) provided me a videotape of the film. They also sent a copy of the shooting script and hundreds of slides and stills from the movie.

Activision has also produced other games based on popular movies. In 1986, Aliens (the movie) became the model for Aliens: The Computer Game. Steve Cartwright (the creator of programs like Hacker, Hacker II, and GeeBee Air Rally) developed this software classic, and here is how it was done.

Jermaine: What led to the development of *Aliens*?

Steve Cartwright: Believe it or not, Activision owned the

rights to *Aliens* a year before the movie appeared in theaters. However, the in-house programmers, artists and game designers knew nothing about that arrangement. After seeing *Aliens* one afternoon, we all left the theater with the same idea: *Aliens* would be the perfect subject for a computer game. The next day I brought up the idea and found out that Activision already owned the rights to that particular property.

Jermaine: Tell me more about how the project began.

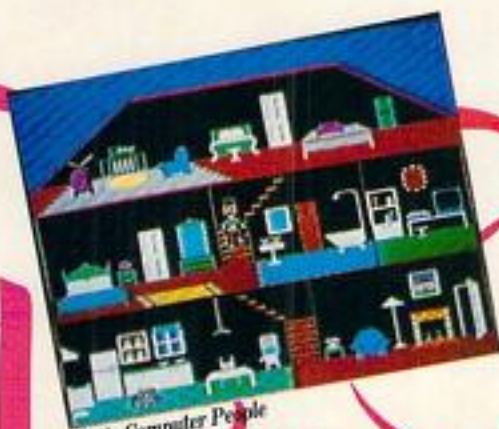
Cartwright: We planned out the entire program in 15 minutes. It was just a matter of analyzing the movie, breaking it down into key scenes, and coming up with a game concept which re-creates each particular situation.

The games were designed to share a common quality. When you participate in an *Aliens* challenge, your fate is truly in

around on the floor. These little devils are called "Face Huggers." In short, the owners of the license were concerned about legal technicalities, correct terminology and "good taste" at this time. We had kept in close contact with Twentieth Century Fox throughout the making of the program, so they knew all about the games and really liked the finished product.

Not many people know that the company had an east coast design center. Back in 1982, Garry and Dan Kitchen, John Van Ryzin, Paul Willson and Kevin Kalkut started the east coast design center (based in Glen Rock, New Jersey). I talked with Garry Kitchen to learn the secrets of this lost tribe of Activision.

Jermaine: How did you start out?
Garry Kitchen: We joined Activision because they needed developers with innovative ideas, and we wanted to keep busy.



Little Computer People



The Great American Cross-Country Road Race



Ghostbusters



Hacker II: The Doomsday Papers



Last Ninja 2



Predator

your own hands. Each game is a tough little assignment where experience is the best teacher. You can play to win or experiment with different ideas, but you can't blame your failure on random events or bad luck. Those factors don't exist.

Jermaine: Did Twentieth Century Fox ask you to make many changes in the final program?

Cartwright: There were some minor changes alright, but nothing we couldn't take care of right away. Twentieth Century Fox was very concerned about the fact that our transitional scenes contained direct quotes from the shooting script. I was led to believe that Activision might have to pay for the privilege of using that material in the program. Thank goodness our legal people investigated the situation and said everything was fine.

Another problem concerned the fact that you couldn't say the aliens were killing people. They were actually capturing human beings for later use (which would be the cause of their death). We also had to use the correct terminology for everything. You couldn't talk about a small alien creature crawling

In 1980 my older brother Steve moved to the west coast and started his own company, Woodside Design Associates. Woodside did a lot of military contracting as well as designing games. Steve also knew a number of people at NASA. So he eventually contacted Activision and negotiated a deal to produce *Space Shuttle: A Journey Into Space*. *Space Shuttle* was more than just an arcade-style game because the product was designed in concert with NASA. It was an accurate simulation of a space shuttle mission, containing the orbital mathematics and physics of a real space flight. We still think it's the best space shuttle simulation ever done on any machine.

Meanwhile, back in New Jersey, we started working on Atari video game projects. *Keystone Kapers* featured a little man chasing crooks through a department store, while *Pressure Cooker* simulated a chef cooking hamburgers in a fast food restaurant. These early games were humorous and a lot of fun to play, but the video game market was losing ground. So I started playing around with the Commodore 64.

Continued on page 71