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INTERVIEW

Howard Scott Warshaw

By Keith Phipps • Feb 2, 2005 • 3PM

A true pioneer in the field of home video games, Howard Scott Warshaw left the straitlaced world of Hewlett-Packard in the early '80s to join up with Atari, where he created some of the company's most famous titles—as well as its most infamous one.

Warshaw's 1981 creation *Yars' Revenge* remains a challenging game that only looks like a straightforward outer-space shoot-'em-up. He followed it in 1982 with *Raiders Of The Lost Ark*, an adventure game that pushed the technological limits of the Atari system. Warshaw was riding high when he received his next assignment: the video-game adaptation of *E.T.* But a tight deadline cut into his programming time, leading to a game that disappointed fans and helped compound Atari's financial woes. According to urban folklore, millions of unsold *E.T.* cartridges now reside in a landfill in New Mexico.

Warshaw stayed at Atari long enough to develop *Saboteur*, a game that only saw release last year, as part of the Atari Flashback system. Since his days at Atari, Warshaw has written two books: the card-game guide *The Complete Book Of PAN*, and *Conquering College*. He also returned briefly to the gaming industry, but now he mainly concentrates on documentary filmmaking. His most recent release was the multi-part Atari retrospective *Once Upon Atari*, which is available at onceuponatari.com, where Warshaw maintains a web presence.

Warshaw recently spoke to *The Onion A.V. Club* about the ups and downs of video gaming's formative years.

O: Not to be too disparaging of Atari, but *Yars' Revenge* is one of the few Atari 2600 games that's as enjoyable now as it was then.

HSW: Well, thank you very much. The goal of *Yars' Revenge* was for me to make a game that I would want to play, that I would find fun. I felt that I was a gamer, and I thought that if I do a game that I enjoy, that I really like playing, then a lot of gamers would enjoy it. I used a lot of techniques and sound effects. I had a lot more formal training than a lot of the people

Q were there. There were a lot of hackers there, and I had a master's in computer engineering. But we were all pretty wacky. It was just a really fun and interesting and diverse crew. Everybody there had other hobbies and other interests. There were people there who were boatmakers, people who had been professional gamblers for a while, people who had been academics and gotten bored with that and come over into microcomputing. There was one guy who literally, a year or two before he got to Atari, had been a bum in the streets of Berkeley. He'd taught himself to program, and wrangled his way in, and ended up doing real well at Atari, for a while, before he self-destructed later. But it was a very interesting crew, a lot of very creative, very neurotic people.

O: How did you approach the assignment for *Raiders Of The Lost Ark*?

HSW: With *Raiders Of The Lost Ark*, it was a whole different thing. My favorite genre is action games. I like twitch games. *Yars' Revenge* is exactly my kind of game. Now, I wasn't a big adventure-game fan, but I respect the genre. When it came to me to do *Raiders Of The Lost Ark*, and go meet Steven Spielberg, and do some sort of pseudo-interview with him, I showed him *Yars'* and we talked a little. He said, "Okay, I definitely want Howard to do *Raiders Of The Lost Ark*," and then he later requested me for *E.T.*, which I'm sure we'll get to. But with *Raiders*, the goal for me was... You know the game *Adventure*, by Warren Robinett? That game established a genre. It had a huge following, so it was a little

intimidating doing an adventure game after *Adventure* was out. My feeling was that I needed to make what I would consider to be the best adventure game on the system, and it had to be a big step up from the game *Adventure*. I like to innovate. To me, if it's worth doing something, it's worth doing it well. Do something that's going to demand attention and notice. Sure, I bet that goes back to my childhood. [Laughs.] I actually made a video of the game and went and showed that to Spielberg. I narrated and played through the whole game. It was one of the few times in my life that I played the whole game perfectly. It was right on time. I showed this tape to Spielberg, and he goes, "It's just like a movie!" He was really impressed with the demo tape of the game, and I thought, "All right, Steven Spielberg is telling me he likes this thing, he thinks it's like a movie." That was a great moment in my life.

O: There's a clip on your site of him calling you a "certifiable genius." Is it based on that?

HSW: No, no, that was during an interview where he was actually discussing some stuff about *E.T.* Spielberg and I got to spend a few afternoons here and there together. We would meet whenever he came up to Sunnyvale, and sometimes I went down to visit him at his office. There was some time that we spent together, sort of goofing around. I explained why he was an alien. I had this theory that in the early '80s, we were very close to contact from aliens and other planets and stuff like that. I felt that if the aliens were going to come down, if people were smart enough to visit Earth, then they were smart enough not to come down and say "Hi!" They would send a recon team, a sort of advance team to culturalize the planet, and prepare it to meet the aliens; not like in *The Day The Earth Stood Still*. Spielberg had done a couple of movies like *E.T.* and *Close Encounters*, some of the first movies that had portrayed aliens as non-threatening people to us. Those movies became *hugely* successful. They were seen all over the planet, literally. So my theory was that Spielberg was the engineer of the advance team. His job was to make movies that showed aliens in a positive light.

O: Now he's making *War Of The Worlds*. What does that do to your theory?

HSW: Maybe they didn't follow through with their bonus check.

O: So that brings us to *E.T.*, which, for better or for worse, is probably what you're best known for.

HSW: *Yars' Revenge* is consistently rated one of the best games of all time. And *E.T.* is consistently rated one of the worst games of all time. That means I have the greatest range of any game designer in history.

O: So assuming *E.T.* really is the worst game, how did that happen?

HSW: Atari was negotiating the rights with Spielberg. They waited a long time to do that. It was 1982, and they were negotiating well into July. Toward the end of July, they finished the negotiations, and they paid an inordinate amount of money for the rights to *E.T.*, more than they could probably realistically hope to make from the game.

O: Wasn't it something like \$20 million?

HSW: It was over that, it was like \$22 million. So at the end of July, around July 27 or 28, I get a call saying, "Hey, can you do *E.T.* in, like, five weeks?" No one had ever done a game in less than six months or so. They needed someone who could do the game really fast, and Spielberg wanted me to do the game, because he liked me, and he thought *Raiders* was cool, and he liked *Yars' Revenge*. The people, the managers, thought that nobody else could really pull it off. They came to me, and I sort of held them up, said, "Yeah, I can do a game in six weeks, if we make the right agreement." But, to me, it was a great challenge. I liked the idea of this huge technical challenge, to try and produce a full game in six weeks. Actually, it was five weeks. It was the end of July, and it had to be ready on September 1. Because to make the Christmas season, it would have to go into production by September 1, and they did not want to miss that Christmas season. So I did what I could. I tried to design a game that

could be done in five or six weeks. It wasn't like I borrowed a lot of stuff or rehashed a lot of other things; it was all original code and graphics that I put together. I just worked my ass off for five weeks and made a game. I got a bunch of signatures in it, and a whole bunch of things. Yeah, it's got some problems. If I'd had another week or two to work on it, it may well have been a much better game. But for a five-week effort, which is what it was—about 35 days that I had to work on it, including the design—it's a hell of a game.

O: Is the landfill story true or false?

HSW: I say false.

O: You don't know definitively, though?

HSW: I don't know if anybody knows definitively, because I doubt that it happened, so nobody can really know. I have a reasoning for it. At the time this was going on, Atari was in huge financial trouble. Atari's a company that goes from the most explosive and successful company in American history to the fastest-falling company in American history. They went from, like, nothing, to \$2 billion in sales, in just a couple years, and then the next year, they lost money.

O: It can't all be the *E.T.* cartridge, right?

HSW: Oh, no, no, it's not the *E.T.* cartridge. Atari, for years, was using the leverage that they had to just screw distributors everywhere. When they had a hot game, they would force distributors to buy copies of the old games that weren't selling anymore, just to get copies of the new game. This is the kind of stuff they were doing. So when things started to turn on them, everyone in the industry was waiting to jump on them with both feet. That's what killed Atari, was the ill will that they had generated through their cutthroat business practices on their way up.

O: In general, what was it like to work there?

HSW: It was intense. It was a lot of fun, usually, but sometimes it was very scary. There were times when you didn't know what was going to happen from day to day: if everyone was going to get fired, if the industry was going to fall apart, if huge money was going to be handed out. Literally, you come to work, and it's like, "There's a chance I could get a five-figure check today as a bonus. There's a chance I could get fired today, because something didn't go very well." And what would you do? Where would you go? Everyone was getting totally spoiled and wrecked, in terms of going and working at a regular company after working at Atari. It's insane. It's a crazy idea. The really weird thing is that I came there from HP, so I had a better sense of what life was like outside of Atari than a lot of other people there did. For a lot of the people, this was their first corporate job. You have to imagine people smoking dope in their offices whenever they want to, where the security team has orders to keep the police away, because they don't want to take a chance on anyone getting arrested, because it would keep them from putting games out. You gotta imagine showing up out of college, making huge amounts of money—two or three times what your peers are making—imagine going in there and thinking that's what professional life is supposed to be. That falls apart, now you have to go get a job at another company.

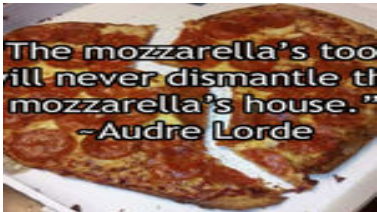
O: What was your next step?

HSW: After Atari, I was fortunate, because I had made some decent money. I took some time off, because I needed to digest my experience. It was the most intense thing that had ever happened to me in my life. Atari was just an amazing experience. You saw people self-destructing, you saw people realizing their potential, learning their limits and capabilities. There were a lot of amazing things to see, human-wise, and I wanted to tell that story in some way. It took me a while to get my head around it. Then I started *Once Upon Atari*, over the course of many years. First, I waited for the statute of limitations to run out. Then I went and started working on it, because I realized that I needed closure on this whole thing myself. I need to get this story out, and to see it for myself, and to share it with a lot of people. People were interested in what was going on at Atari, but no one was telling

anywhere near the truth about it. People were making up these ridiculous stories, and there were these images of the older, wacky professors in lab coats running around making these cute games for kids. That's not what it was like at all. If parents knew what was happening with us behind the scenes making the games, I don't know if they'd have been as enthusiastic about their kids getting the games.

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DrKumAndGo → Eric Kahn · 2 years ago

Oh wow. OH WOW.

OH MAN

You had seven years - SEVEN. YEARS. - to get this right. This one, simple thing.

This ... this is ...

BWAHAHAHAHAHA

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I haven't self-destructed yet.

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Dunno, that firstie looked like a cry for help.

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had been a bum in the streets of Berkeley. He'd taught himself to program, and wrangled his way in, and ended up doing real well at Atari, for a while, before he self-destructed later." That sounds like Steve Jobs, apart from the self-destruction (sort of) <http://www.gamasutra.com/view/...>

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Good interview! I forget how I got here.

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