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Video games are a waste of time for men with nothing else to do.

- Ray Bradbury, Author of The Martian Chronicles

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Screenshot from Dragon's Lair

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Dragon's Lair and the Laser Game Craze - Daring Discs

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Starcom/Cinematronics 1983

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Daring Duo

Arcade operators face a slump heading into 1983. After a decade of wild expansion, there are 1,375,000 video game machines installed in locations, earning 87 percent of the coin-op industry's total revenue of \$8.9 billion. This seems good on the surface, but the influx of game makers is splitting up the pie, and average weekly takes by video games has plummeted 22 percent, down to \$109 per machine. Operators are starting to tighten their belts and order fewer cabinets.

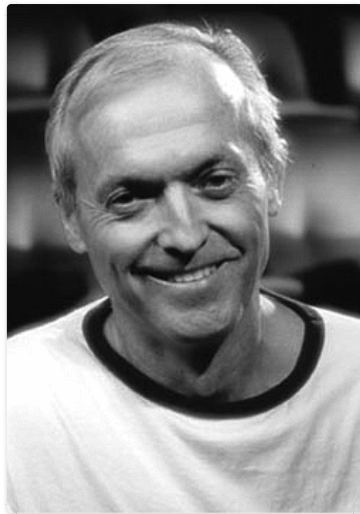
The apparent savior of the arcades grows up as a born gearhead. While just a kid in California, Rick Dyer invents a cuckoo clock that not only talks the time, it spouts a plethora of famous quotes. Later he rigs his car with a computer which asks his dates by name their preferences of radio stations. When he becomes the first non-



Rick Dyer, circa 1982

degreeed engineer at Hughes Electronics, a prototype he makes of an electronic horse racing game catches the eye of toy giant Mattel. The company hires him as soon as he graduates from California Polytechnic University in Pomona. While with the company, Dyer designs some of the popular hand-held games coming out of Mattel in the 1970's, and he also works on the company's home console unit *Intellivision*. On the side he also develops the AES system, which would use LCD screens in the back of airplane seats to entertain flyers. He then moves to Coleco, developing their arcade line of hand held versions of titles such as *Pac-Man*, *Defender* and *Donkey Kong*. He is also involved in the project that eventually becomes the *ColecoVision*. Forming his own company, Advanced Microcomputer Systems, he experiments with interactive movie concepts including a system using computer controlled filmstrips, and then moves to a cassette based set-up. He ultimately decides that emerging laserdisc technology is the best medium to work with. The game he intends the machine to play is *Shadoan*, a sword and sorcery epic inspired by the J.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* books and the original computer text game *Adventure*.

Disney Calling



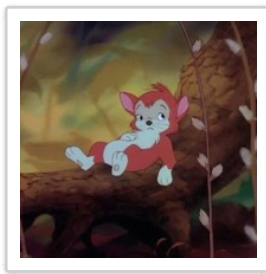
Don Bluth, undated photo

It's one of those neat cosmic quirks that Don Bluth was born the same year as the release of Walt Disney's ground breaking animated film *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. When 6 year-old Don sees the film, he knows he has found his calling. Born in 1937 in El Paso, Texas, Bluth grows up on a farm in Payson, Utah, south of Salt Lake City. He is seldom seen without a sketch pad and pencil in his hands, riding his horse into town and sitting in the movie theatre enthralled watching the latest Disney film. Never taking an art lesson, Bluth uses his pad to copy Disney characters from books. The Bluth clan moves to Santa Monica, California, and when Don graduates from high school in 1955 he goes straight to Burbank and the Disney Studio with a portfolio under his arm. He starts at the company working under veteran Disney animator John Lounsberry on *Sleeping Beauty* as an "in-betweener", someone who draws the frames between the key drawings made by the animator. He leaves to pursue a formal education at Brigham Young University as an English major, but continues working summers at Disney. Upon graduation in 1967 he goes to work for cut-rate animation house Filmation Studios as a layout artist, rapidly moving to head of the department and staying there for four years. In 1971 he returns to Disney, moving with unprecedented speed up the ranks from animator to director in three years. His work there includes *Robin Hood* (1973), *The Rescuers* (1977) and *Pete's Dragon* (1977). As a reaction

to what he determines as Disney's steady abandonment of their classic animation style, he and fellow animators John Pomeroy and Gary Goldman start work in Bluth's garage in early 1975 on a short film, intended to revel in the classical style. Called *Banjo, the Woodpile Cat*, they work on it nights and weekends for four and a half years, and their crew steadily grows as other animators at Disney show interest in working in the classical style. In 1979 Bluth uses the short to secure financing from a film investment company called Aurora Productions for a feature film idea, and on September 13 the trio leave Disney to start their own production company called Don Bluth Animation. Following them the next day are 11 other animators, dubbed "The Disney Defectors" by the press. The departure of Bluth and his team sets back the production of Disney's *The Fox and the Hound* by six months. The 27 minute long *Banjo* is first shown in two movie theaters upon its completion in 1979, and it eventually airs as a TV special in 1980 on HBO, and again on ABC in 1982.



Bluth animated this scene from *Robin Hood*, Disney 1973



Banjo, the Woodpile Cat by Bluth Studios 1979



The Secret of NIMH, Don Bluth Studios/Aurora/MGM 1982

For the subject of their newly financed film they enlist Robert O'Brien's seminal children's novel *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH*, which had been rejected as a possible movie project by Disney. Under the new title of *The Secret of NIMH* and with a 7 million dollar budget, the film details the trials and tribulations of the brave widowed mouse Mrs. Brisby. Her character's name is changed from the book to avoid possible litigation with the company Wham-O, sellers of the Frisbee. In order to save her family from the treacherous farm tractor, she throws in with a gang of rats who have been genetically altered to gain human-like intelligence. The movie is released in 1982, and while it is a study in wondrous animation and classic storytelling, it is crushed by Steven Spielberg's *E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial* juggernaut of that year. Aurora backs out of the financing deal for Bluth's next planned feature *East of the Sun, West of the Moon*, and he is left looking for a new project. When Dyer approaches him about doing the animation in a new game for his laserdisc system, Bluth and company gratefully agree. While the project can't really afford the animator's high animation costs, Bluth accepts a deal where his company will gain 1/3 interest in a new company set up for the venture called Starcom, with Dyer owning another third. Cinematronics, pioneer of vector graphics technology in video games with their 1977 *Space Wars*, is looking to laser technology for a reprieve from their Chapter 11 bankruptcy filing in November of 1982. They sign a deal to manufacture and market the new game while making up the final third of the partnership.

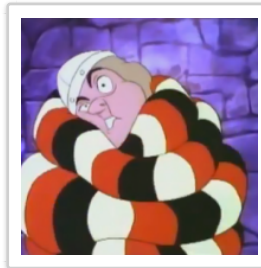
JUMP: Cinematronics and Space Wars



Astron Belt, Sega 1983



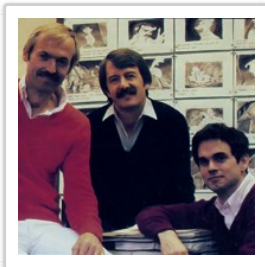
Opening screen from Dragon's Lair



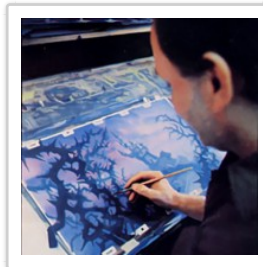
Why'd it have to be snakes?

The Dragon's Lair Opens

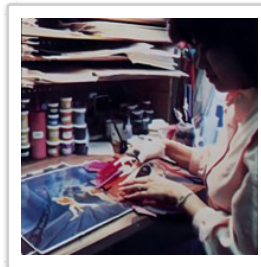
In 1982, Sega previews the first video game to feature laserdisc technology, titled *Astron Belt*, first surfacing at the fall A.M.O.A. show in Chicago. It features live-action film footage rendered by a laserdisc, which the player interacts with by controlling a computer generated spaceship superimposed on the images. Seeing the game demoed in San Diego, Dyer and his team know that the arcade is the best platform for their new laser system, and they also realize that Sega is at least a year and half to two years from perfecting the technology. They rush back to the lab with renewed vigor, now knowing that they have entered into a race with Sega to be the first to bring laserdisc video game technology to market. Meanwhile, the Bluth Group is busy completing the animation for what is now known as *Dragon's Lair*. Spinning off a tale from its Shadoan roots, head writer and designer Victor Penman, along with Darlene Waddington and Marty Folger, pen a story to chronicle the struggles of the valiant, but rather clumsy, knight Dirk the Daring. His quest is to infiltrate a castle magically enchanted by evil wizard Mordread and rescue the fair Princess Daphne, guarded by fire-breathing dragon Singe. Reading the title, one wonders if perhaps the creators were also inspired by the 1981 fantasy film *Dragonslayer*, starring Peter MacNicol and Ralph Richardson.



Don Bluth, Gary Goldman and John Pomeroy, circa 1982



Dragon's Lair background being painted



A cell from Dragon's Lair being painted

At any of the 800 decision points in the Dragon's Lair storyline, the player must use either the joystick or the sword button to direct the on-screen Dirk to make a move. If it's the correct one, the laserdisc scans to the next part of the game. If it's the wrong one, a death scene is displayed and the player loses a life. The gang at Bluth Group, with a staff of 70, logs hundred of unpaid hours of overtime to complete the animation, a process that takes six months. Dragon's Lair consists of a total of 27 minutes of animation, or 50,000 drawings. Played straight through without making a

mistake, playing time is a total of six minutes. Each second of screen time takes 24 hand-painted cells, a number higher than the industry standard, and the total animation budget comes out to 1.3 million dollars. Although there are 38 different rooms in Singe's castle, the player only has to survive 18 of them to win. To keep the game from becoming too repetitive, the system cycles randomly through the pool of rooms. Keeping costs down rules out professional voice acting; talent is culled from the staff. Dirk himself is practically mute, save for his occasional grunts of effort, Homer Simpsonish yelps, or screams of anguish during the numerous and frequently gruesome death scenes. His exultations are provided by assistant editor Dan Molina, and clean-up animator Vera Lanpher is the breathy voice of Daphne. Her speech bears more than a passing resemblance to Marilyn Monroe, and her body shape and 'assets' are taken from the pages of Playboy. Chris Stone is responsible for the brief musical stings and bridges in the game.



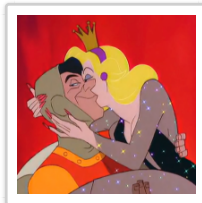
Dragon's Lair cabinet



Be the envy of everyone in the lunch room



Don Bluth and Friends, circa 1983



Is that a sword in your sheath or you just happy to see me?

A Fiery Reception

After four years of development, a prototype version is shown at the spring 1983 AOE show in Chicago, creating a large buzz around the game from operators. Gamers finally get their hands on it when Dragon's Lair is released to arcades on July 1. Cinematronics manufactures and markets the game, and by doing so phase out the vector game division on which they built their fortune. Since the units cost arcade operators on average an unprecedented 4,300 dollars each, twice the cost of a conventional cabinet, it becomes the first game to cost 50 cents to play in arcades. At the time, I remember being incensed by this increase; in a decade or so, among games costing \$1.00 or more, I'll be thinking back to how good I had it at 50 cents. The game is the first arcade system with filmed, animated action, but it is barely interactive. While the compelling attract mode lures passersby with the promise of the ability to "control the actions of a daring adventurer", a player can merely decide when and where Dirk should move or use his sword. But despite the price hike and the lack of deep interaction, Dragon's Lair causes a sensation in the arcades. No one can certainly complain about its rich, beautifully drawn images, harkening back to the classical animation days of yore. At its peak, Dragon's Lair brings in on average around \$1400 a week, about 80 times the amount of a conventional game at the time. In the first eight months of its release to the arcades, the game grosses 32 million dollars worth of sales. Cinematronics gets 2,000 units out the door initially, and then struggles to meet demand as orders head north of 8,000. In the arcades, huge crowds gather around the machines, causing operators to install additional monitors on top of them to appease the thronging masses of players vying for a look.

Starcom eventually sells 43 million dollars worth of systems. Dragon's Lair also makes the biggest inroads into popular culture since the *Pac-Man* bonanza. Lunch boxes, board games, books, trading cards, and a moat-load of other merchandise hits the streets. Perhaps best cementing its status as an early 80's icon, ABC's cheese-fest human interest show *That's Incredible!* features Dragon's Lair in an on-air contest between champion players. It makes another TV appearance as a permanent prop on NBC's popular sitcom *Silver Spoons*, debuting in September 1983. Featuring Ricky Schroder as a young kid who moves in with his rich father, seeing his Dragon's Lair (along with *Asteroids*, *Tempest* and *Gorf*) sitting in the background unused drives me crazy with jealousy. The game goes on to receive the San Diego-based comic convention ComicCon's Inkpot Award for the *First Interactive Laser Disc Arcade Game*, as well as an Arkie Award from Electronic Games magazine for *Best Arcade Audio/Visuals*. It's also profiled in an all-Dragon's Lair episode of the videogame TV show *Starcade*. The game also sparks a debate along the lines of "Why is the Mona Lisa smiling?", as people wonder what Daphne whispers in Dirk's ear to illicit such a reaction at the end of the game.



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COMMENTS >>



Neil

July 1, 2013 at 9:44 pm

What an awesome and informative article. Thank you. Happy birthday Dirk!

Reply ↓



William

July 2, 2013 at 12:22 am

Thanks muchly. It certainly is one of the longer ones 😊

Reply ↓

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