STARBURST

™

WE REPORT ON ANIMATOR DON BLUTH'S
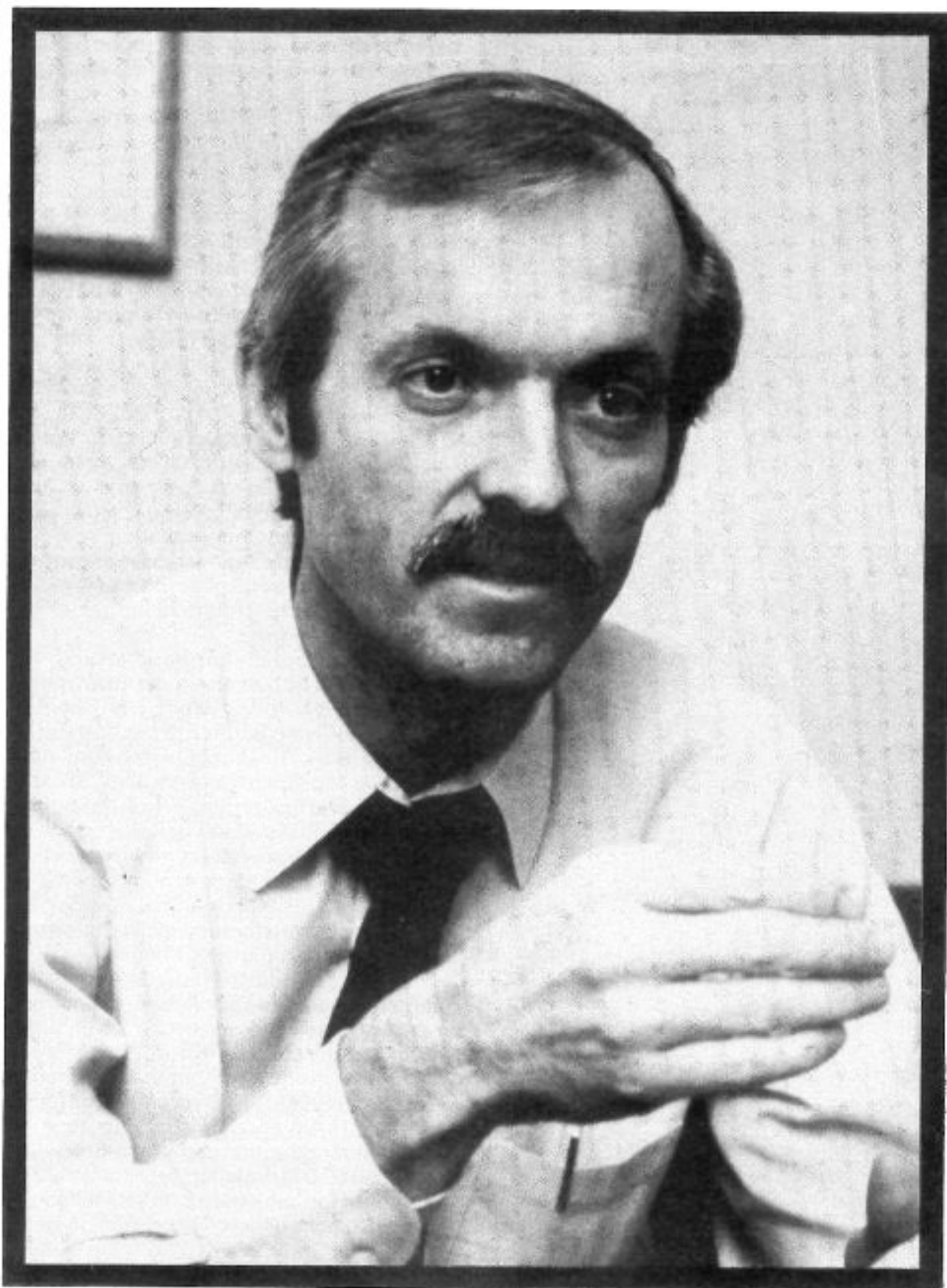NEW CONCEPT IN ARCADE VIDEO GAMING

DRAGON'S LAIR

PLUS:
THE BOMB & THE DAY AFTER,
JAMES BOND SPECIAL EFFECTS,
AND A PREVIEW ON THE FORTHCOMING
FANTASY MOVIE, *DREAMSCAPE*

EXTRA! WE INTERVIEW
"BIG MEAT EATER" DIRECTOR
CHRIS WINDSOR

DRAGON'S LAIR

Animation Don Bluff re-defines the Video Arcade Game

Facing page: *Two scenes from Dragon's Lair featuring Dirk the Daring and Princess Daphne.* Top left: *Don Bluth, animation producer on* Dragon's Lair *and director of the acclaimed* Secret of NIMH. Above: *The detailed special effects animation and colour matching work that goes into creating* Dragon's Lair. Below: *The game as found in your local arcade.*

Feature by Francesca Landau & Phil Edwards

In 1982, arcade video games made three times as much money as the entire film industry, so it's not surprising that all the major studios have included a video game subsidiary within their home video departments.

With the popularity of games like *Superman 3, War Games, Tron, Pac-Man, Donkey Kong* and *Frogger* (the latter three conversely inspiring their own animated TV series) a major consideration with any new science fiction/fantasy project is whether or not it is suitable material for a video game – footage to be used in both the movie and the video game tie-in would have to be planned at pre-production stage. Until recently, most such games consisted of a few dots and sticks chasing other dots and sticks, a very limited number of sets (the vid-industry's term for the backgrounds used in games) and plenty of player imagination. Perhaps this accounts for the recent fall-off in video arcade business – reported to be as much as 40%.

But now there is something new in the way of video games – something which is revolutionising not only the arcade business, but might also have long-term effects on movies and the way we watch them. Due to a combination of high-resolution laser disc technology, live action footage and animation, it is now possible to not only play

a game but to participate in it and, to a point, direct the action on the video screen.

In May 1983, an arcade in San Diego, California, previewed a laser disc game, *Astron Belt*, developed by a Japanese firm, in which a computer generated spaceship flies through space backgrounds that were originally shot as live-action special effects on film. *Astron Belt* has already proved itself a major success in Japan and Europe, despite the higher cost of 50 cents (about 40p) a play.

Now comes *Dragon's Lair*, the very first player-interactive, animated "mini-movie game", designed by Rick Dyer, the founder of Advanced Microcomputer Systems. Animated by Don Bluth Productions, its popularity and the potential it represents is, in great part, responsible for pulling the arcade industry out of its decline. And not only the arcade industry. Bluth, an ex-Disney animator and director of the acclaimed *Secret of NIMH*, recalls, "Right after NIMH, our union went into a strike, people were out on the streets and couldn't work. The people that were going to back our second picture just pulled right away and said they couldn't afford more money. The game came along at just the right moment, and it looked financially promising. We had some new investors that stepped up because games looked more lucrative than features. We feel that *Dragon's Lair* provides several advantages that video games previously haven't furnished. Because of the human ➤
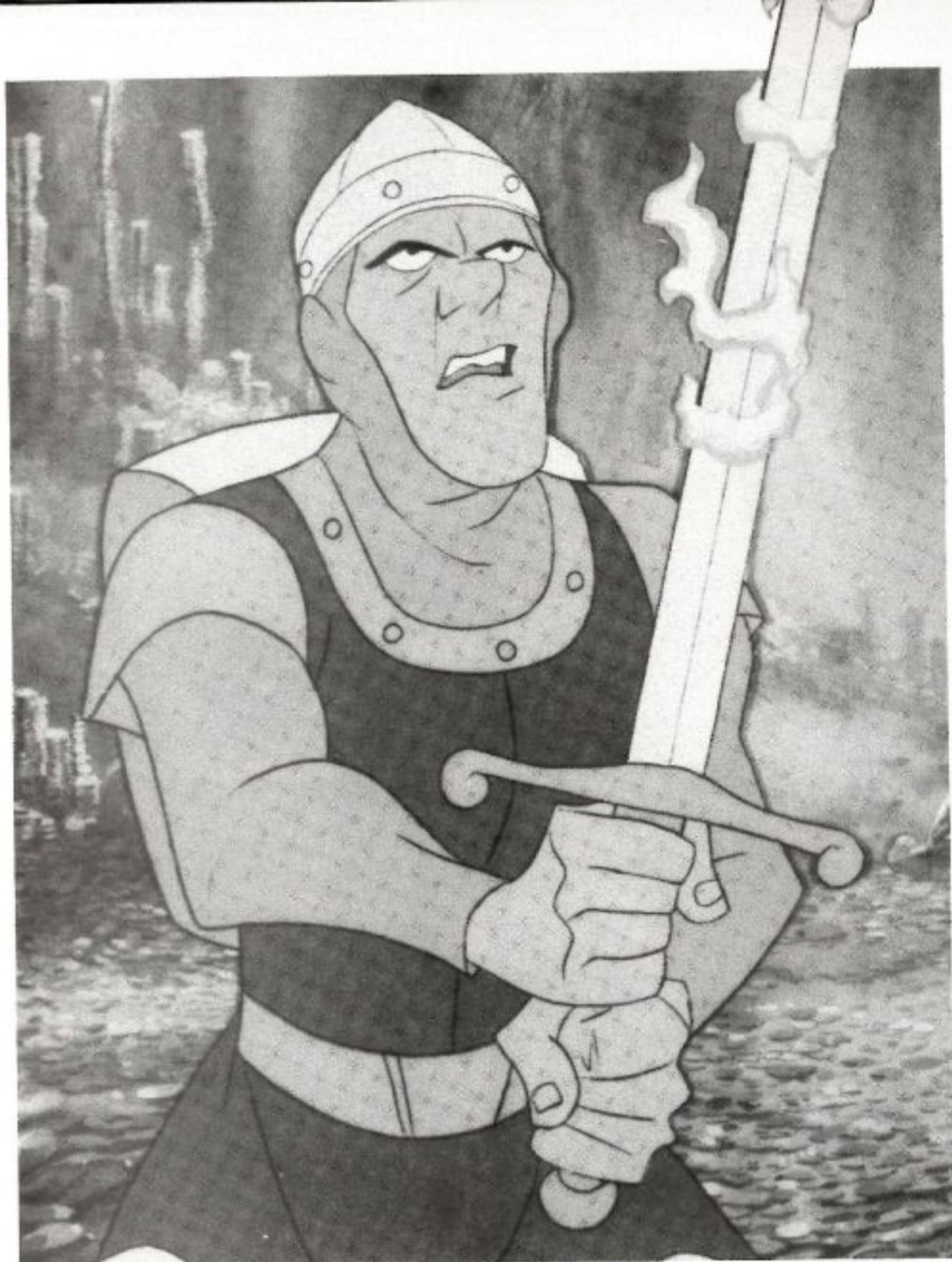
Above: *Dirk the Daring lifts his flaming sword in this scene from* Dragon's Lair. *Below: A shocking experience for the brave knight in the hot seat.*

shapes and the elaborate full artwork, the game is easier to watch for extended periods of time. The three-dimensional drawings, the conflicts and threats seem closer to actual human experience. In these ways the computer ends up giving more back to the human."

Dragon's Lair combines full animation and computer technology to create a very definite storyline. Dirk the Daring (the player is Dirk) battles all manner of horrific threats to save Princess Daphne, held captive by the Evil Dragon in the *Dragon's Lair*. His success depends on the skill of the player and the choices he makes as he sends Dirk through a variety of rooms, each containing their own cleverly devised peril. As Gary Goldman, Bluth's animation director, explains, "We decided on a certain game format which, we felt, was from very easy to very difficult. As we began programming, we realised players may have a high memory situation, so we made the sequence random-based. You only have to get through 18 of 42 rooms to win, but those will constantly rotate so the game won't become boring."

Among some of the hazards that Dirk encounters as he battles his way from room to room are The Robot Knight, The Flaming Sword, The Flying Barding (a magical suit of horse armour), The Giant Chicken Foot, Acid Creatures, Mud Men, Geysers, Bats, Skulls and Slime and finally, the Dragon – should the player be that skilled.

The game has proved such a runaway hit that not only have arcade owners found it necessary to install additional monitor screens for bystanders to watch other people play, but Hannah-Barbera, Marvel Productions Ltd and the Ruby-Spears animation house are considering a Saturday morning TV series based on the adventures of Dirk and the characters from *Dragon's Lair*.

The animation for the game was carried out at the Bluth Studios after receiving the game design from Advanced Microcomputers. Over four months, thirteen animators produced 50,000 drawings for a total of 27 minutes of full animation on a $1.1 million budget. Special effects, like crumbling walls, deadly vapours and raging fire were later added to signal to the player an immediate danger. Music (by Cris Stone) and dialogue were added in stereo to enhance the atmosphere of playing a movie rather than a game. Finally, the entire film was transferred onto high resolution laser disc for use in the game itself.

Thus far, an estimated 3500 games have been sold at $4000 each (although replacement discs and programmes only cost the arcade owners approximately $1000) putting the game's gross to date at $14 million. Bluth expects to sell 100,000 games making a total of $400 million. A home version will be on the market after *Dragon's Lair* has had its run in arcades and will use a laser disc attachment that will retain the same picture quality and operation as the arcade version.

The Bluth Studios now have three more games in development at a budget of over $1.5 million – a science fiction game called *Space Ace*, a time travel game, *Time Warp* and just like in the movies, a sequel to *Dragon's Lair*.

Could this be the beginning of viewer participation and manipulation in motion pictures? Don Bluth, who sees *Dragon's Lair* as something of The Jazz Singer of the 80s, thinks so, "It's a matter of memory. When you can get the laser disc to store enough memory, then you can make infinite possibilities."

(Special thanks to Randy Lofficier and Don Bluth Productions.) ∎