



THE MAKING OF...

DRAGON'S LAIR

In a time when arcade games hosted basic graphics, there was one game that changed peoples' perspectives of games indefinitely. That game was *Dragon's Lair*, the first of its kind to feature movie quality visuals and interactive gameplay. Kim Wild talks to Gary Goldman about this laser disc classic.



For those unfamiliar with *Dragon's Lair*, the game starred, Dirk the Daring, a bumbling oaf who has to enter a booby-trapped castle to rescue his girlfriend from a ferocious dragon. Unlike other arcade games of its time, or indeed our time, *Dragon's Lair* was more like an interactive movie, where the player would direct the main character in a series of sequences, than a platformer where you'd assume complete control. The outcome of each cartoon scene is determined by entering the right move

at each decision point; make the wrong decision and you'll face immediate death.

The original concept came from Rick Dyer of Advanced Microcomputer Systems (AMS). The company had been working on a fantasy game for two years but wanted to make a more visual masterpiece. After methods of animation including slideshows and a tape deck, cash till roll and giant rolodex failed to re-create a hand drawn style, Rick Dyer began to look elsewhere. He discovered laser disc: a brand new optical storage



"WE CHANGED THE CONTINUITY OF GAME-PLAY, WHICH UPSET THE WRITERS AND STORYBOARD ARTISTS OVER AT RICK'S SHOP"

ENTERING A 3D WORLD

In 2002, Rick Dyer, Gary Goldman and Don Bluth collaborated on a sequel to the franchise and concocted *Dragon's Lair 3D*. Released on PC, Xbox and GameCube, *Dragon's Lair 3D* saw Dirk enter a trap-infested castle to rescue the beautiful Daphne. Sadly, the game was missing many of its trademark death sequences, something that Goldman does regret. "We were disappointed that some of the humorous death situations could not be incorporated. We had many discussions about it and it was going to delay production and send costs through the roof." The game was condemned by the specialist press but still seemed to garner a following. "We have had a ton of fan mail that contradicts the critics' opinions," recalls Goldman. "But then, those that wrote in are probably die-hard *Dragon's Lair* fans. And they were thrilled to see a revived Dirk in 3D."



Dragon's Lair 3D boasted the same traditional animation of the original but with more freedom to move.

IN THE KNOW



- » PUBLISHER: CINEMATRONICS (US), ATARI (EUROPE)
- » DEVELOPER: AMS
- » RELEASED: 1983
- » GENRE: ADVENTURE GAME
- » EXPECT TO PAY: £900+



relatives, whoever we could convince that this was a solid idea. At one point we even borrowed from Rick Dyer's and Jim Pearce's companies."

DEVELOPMENT ISSUES

Once financial issues had been resolved, it was time to make a start on development. Although Rick Dyer's team had designed their own characters and storyboards, many of these had to be discarded, as they didn't meet the required standards. In the end, character design and animation was left entirely to Don Bluth's production team while Dyer and his loyal designers kept working on ideas and programming the links between each scene. "We changed the continuity of gameplay, which upset the writers and storyboard artists over at Rick's shop," recalls Goldman. "We basically re-storyboarded the game with new designs and sometimes completely different ideas. At the time Rick was very good about keeping his crew's objections from us, letting us find our own way."

Daphne and Dirk also saw an overhaul. Dirk was remodelled as "a clumsy oaf, big feet and hands and not too smart" while Don Bluth spent considerable time drawing Daphne in various seductive poses, inspired by Gary Goldman's old collection of Playboy magazines. It's a fact Goldman recalls vividly. "It was odd walking by Don's office with him in there at the drawing board surrounded by several open Playboy magazines. In the end, Don put Daphne in a very revealing one-piece "thong" swimsuit with a sheer veil that partially covered her." Don Bluth was also responsible for designing the 50 different humorous ways in which Dirk could die including being eaten, squashed and disintegrated.

The script was another area that was largely affected by Don Bluth's team. As Dirk was the main character and dialogue might prove to cause difficulties with foreign language translation, it was scrapped in favour of grunts, groans and screams. Due to lack of funds, all voice acting was dealt with in-house with editor Dan Molina providing Dirk's expressions. Daphne however has to speak as she dispenses crucial information at the big finale featuring the fight with Singe the dragon. Stepping up to the role of air-head Daphne was Key Clean-up Supervisor, Vera Lanpher.

medium that had the ability to replicate movie quality animation. Disc access was random and chapter-based so it allowed almost instant access to any area of the disc. One visit to the cinema later, and the idea for a partnership formed. Gary Goldman, a member of the production team for Don Bluth, recalls how this came about. "He [Dyer] had seen *The Secret of NIMH* in the theatre with his wife, Jan, and decided then that we should be the team to do the animation. He had already put a team of writers and artists together to write a game script and to storyboard the game in sequences. His plan was for a three-way partnership, with his team doing pre-production and the computer programming, Bluth Group was to do the actual production and Cinematronics to do the distribution."

However there were a few problems namely a question of financing. "Each partner-company was to finance its own part of the deal," explains Goldman. "The problem for us was that we didn't have any capital. Our studio operations had just been interrupted by the Screen Cartoonists union strike, and our backers pulled out, leaving us with no cash flow. So we had to borrow cash to get involved, from friends,



THE MAKING OF... DRAGONS LAIR

"IT WAS ODD WALKING BY DON'S OFFICE WITH HIM IN THERE AT THE DRAWING BOARD SURROUNDED BY SEVERAL, OPEN, PLAYBOY MAGAZINES"



Dragon's Lair was hyped to be the future of the arcade game industry but sadly this wasn't to be

...Thanks to Classical Animation and Laser Disc Technology

Thanks to a combination of the two, the result was an animated game that was a breakthrough in the industry. The use of classical animation techniques, such as hand-drawn cels, allowed for a level of detail and fluidity that was previously unattainable in computer-generated graphics. This was made possible by the use of laser disc technology, which allowed for the storage and playback of high-quality video frames. The result was a game that was both visually stunning and technically innovative.

THE ARTISTS
The artists who created the game were a mix of traditional animators and computer graphics specialists. They worked closely together to create a game that was both visually appealing and technically sound.

WHAT IS CLASSICAL ANIMATION?
Classical animation is a technique that involves drawing individual frames of an animation by hand. This allows for a high level of detail and control over the movement of the characters and objects in the scene.

DEVELOPER HIGHLIGHTS
The game was developed by the team at Williams, who were known for their work on other classic arcade games. The use of classical animation and laser disc technology was a key factor in the game's success.

22 minutes of footage featured in the game all created with classical animation

DEVELOPER HIGHLIGHTS

TIME TRAVELLER
SYSTEMS: ARCADE, DVD
YEAR: 1991

THAYER'S QUEST
SYSTEMS: ARCADE, DVD
YEAR: 1984



THE FINAL PRODUCT
With AMS aiming to have the first laser-disc title in arcades, work on *Dragon's Lair* had to be swift. After initial development in October 1982, animation was started in January 1983, while Rick's team managed to compile three colour sequences by March for the Chicago Game Show. Around 130 artists and technicians were involved in development and the final product was finished in June, ready to ship to arcades in July.

In Europe, *Dragon's Lair* was licensed to Atari for production and manufacturing and the cabinet design differed to the American edition.

AMS field-tested the game at the Malibu Grand Prix El Monte, California and were staggered by the impact. Over 200 people were watching in amazement at the game's animation and the same thing was occurring at Cinematronics' own test in San Diego.

Its success in arcades was unprecedented, helped further by the cheaper price set by Cinematronics of 50 cents. As laser disc was an expensive technology in those days (the player alone was \$1,000) the lower price gave the incentive for arcade owners to stock the machine. The immense popularity of the game meant many recouped the cost within a week. "When you went to an arcade, there was always a crowd around the *Dragon's Lair* machine and a line of people waiting to play the game. Many of the arcades placed extra monitors on top of the game cabinet so the crowd could see the animation."

Almost overnight, *Dragon's Lair* became a phenomenon leading to merchandise such as lunch boxes, underwear, stickers and board games, with even a cartoon series launching in 1984. Inevitably, the game was ported



A still cell of Dirk the Daring ready to confront the enemy



A selection of drawings depicting Dirk the dragon in a variety of poses

to over 18 computer formats although none of those had any input from either company barring artwork.

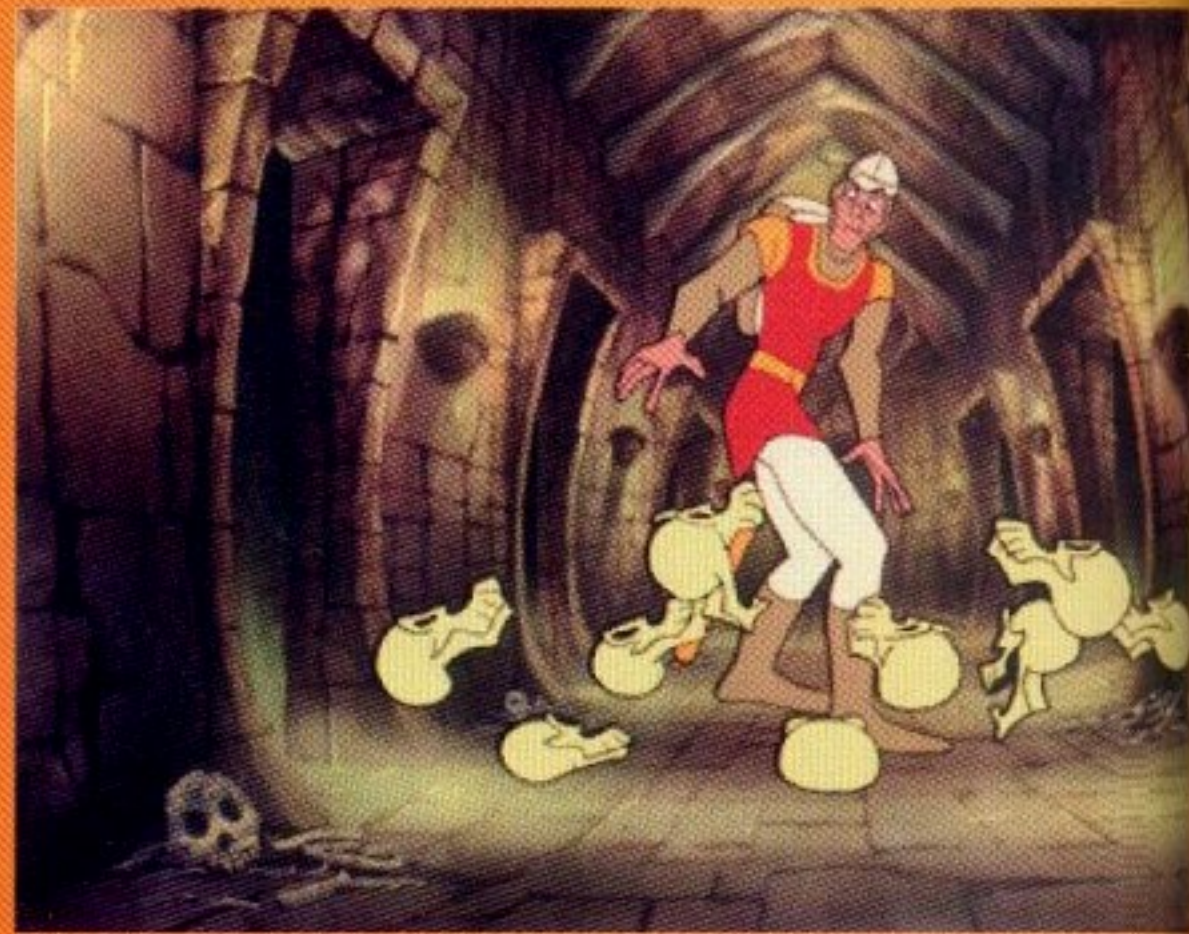
Such success naturally meant a sequel, so a follow-up, *Space Ace*, released in 1984, was born although *Dragon's Lair* devotees would have to wait until 1991 to see *Dragon's Lair II* hit the arcades. Scenes that were left out of *Dragon's Lair II: Time Warp* would eventually see an appearance in *Dragon's Lair III* on PC. However, the popularity of laser-disc games trailed off and the sequels failed to capitalise on the original's success. Laser-disc players were notoriously unreliable, frequently breaking and some of the parts had been discontinued, making them difficult to repair.

The limited nature of the gameplay also meant that the novelty of astounding visuals soon wore off. Goldman suggests why the sequels

lacked the same impact on the market. "*Dragon's Lair* was a 'first', a breakthrough on the imagery for arcade games. Even though *Space Ace* was faster paced and had more spectacular imagery, the audiences had seen the first and were thrilled by it. Also, the arcade industry was in decline - *Dragon's Lair* sparked a momentary positive blip on the [business] screen, but didn't sustain it. With a declining attendance at the arcades, owners were avoiding financial risk; these arcade games were more expensive and not as many *Space Ace* machines were purchased by arcade owners. With regard to *Dragon's Lair II*, production was actually stopped in March of 1984 with it 100 per cent animated but only about 75 per cent in



Riding this mechanical horse was just one of the many exhilarating moments from Dragon's Lair. Biddy 121



Dirk got himself into all sorts of difficult situations - death usually followed.



INTERVIEW WITH JEFF KINDER

Jeff is responsible for the Dragon's Lair Project. Retro Gamer asked some questions.

Retro Gamer: When did you set up the Dragon's Lair Project?
Jeff Kinder: The site went online on August 25, 1997. It had three pages: my story of how I restored my Dragon's Lair machine, History of Dragon's Lair, Space Ace, and Thayer's Quest page, and an online version of the Dragon's Lair owner's manual. Today there are 900+ pages and the site has received near three million hits.

RG: What is it about Dragon's Lair and the sequels that are so appealing?
JK: Originally, it was the graphics/animation. Back in 1983 arcade game graphics were not what they are today. When Dragon's Lair came out, it was so different from anything ever seen before.

RG: Have you ever met the creators?
JK: Yes, I've met all four: Don Bluth, Gary Goldman, Rick Dyer, and John Pomeroy. They are really nice guys and they appreciate what Dave Hallock and I have done with the site to keep the memory of Dragon's Lair alive.

RG: How can readers of Retro Gamer contribute?
JK: We are always looking for more information to add to the website to help keep the games remembered for a long time to come.



* Detailed drawings and descriptions were created months before animation proceeded

"AROUND 130 ARTISTS AND TECHNICIANS WERE INVOLVED IN DEVELOPMENT AND THE FINAL PRODUCT WAS FINISHED IN JUNE"

Dragon's Lair, Space Ace and Dragon's Lair II: Time Warp in early 1997 and then went on to completely re-write the code to accurately copy the original arcade version. To squeeze such information onto a DVD however, requires some work as Paul Gold explains. "To port the classic laser-disc games to DVD and the compatible formats requires some serious finesse. Using a DVD authoring system like the ones a Hollywood studio would use to create DVDs for their movie releases, we are able to recreate the classic arcade experience."

Any regrets? Gary Goldman only has a few. "One thing is that there was a plan for Chris Stone, the composer of the Dragon's Lair music to go to London to use a 40-piece orchestra to record the musical underscore for Dragon's Lair II. I wish we could've done it that way. Also, we have a script for a feature film of Dragon's Lair. I regret that we haven't been able to get the movie into production - and there are a lot of fans out there waiting for it. We've had some great meetings with the major studios. They know the title and like the script but no one has actually said yes. Think good thoughts. It may just happen."

Thanks to Jeff Kinder from The Dragon's Lair Project (<http://www.dragons-lair-project.com/>) for the interview and providing artwork and images for this article. Credit goes to Jason Finn for offering additional information and images. Thanks to Paul Gold of Digital Leisure for answering our questions. Also thanks to Gary Goldman for taking the time out to be interviewed.



OTHER GAMES IN THE SERIES:
 Other Games in the Series: Dragon's Lair
 Dragon's Lair II: Time Warp
 Dragon's Lair III: Curse Of Mordread
 Dragon's Lair 3D
 Space Ace



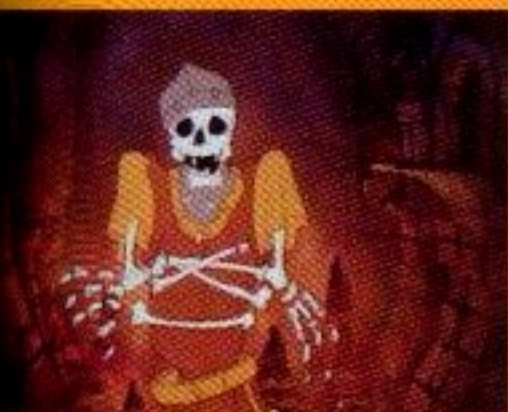
* A storyboard sketches out depicting Dirk trying to save Daphne from Siege the Dragon

colour. The arcade industry was going down and Cinematronics would not complete the game. The game would not be completed until 1989, financed by Leland Corporation, a company that bought out Cinematronics."

THE LEGEND LIVES ON

Although the arcade game exists solely in the hands of devout collectors, the legacy of Dragon's Lair lives on. The Dragon's Lair Project is the largest resource dedicated to laser-disc based games and is the first port of call for anyone seeking out original versions of Dragon's Lair. The DAPHNE emulator is also available so fans and retro gamers can once again experience the thrills of the original all over again.

Companies like Digital Leisure (<http://www.digitalleisure.com>) have made it their quest to bring Dragon's Lair to as many platforms as possible, 20 years after the release of the original. Digital Leisure first acquired the rights to



* The death screen will be familiar to those that just watch's edge-traps on-screen



* The exciting death sequences kept players purposefully trying not to die the next animation.