

From Soup to Nuts....

by Chris Cavanaugh
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DAN KITCHEN GOES THE DISTANCE

Majesco Sales, Inc., tucked away in a small corner of the L.A. Convention Center, was a welcome oasis from the flashing lights and pounding noise of E3's main floor. With current hit titles like **Frogger 2** and **Pong** for the Game Boy Color, and ten titles scheduled for Game Boy Advance, Majesco is poised to be a dominant game publisher in the handheld arena. So, it really came as no surprise to me that this aggressiveness in the marketplace and resurgence of classic titles was being developed by former Activision alum, Dan Kitchen. As Vice President of Product Development, Dan is responsible for development of all handheld products in Majesco's blossoming catalog. Under Dan's direction we'll soon be playing on our GBA's such classic inspired games as **Tomcat F-14**, **Fortress** (think **Rampart** meets **Tetris**), **Earthworm Jim**, **Pitfall: The Mayan Adventure**, and **A Boy and His Blob**.

Since I was fortunate enough to secure some time from Dan's hectic E3 schedule for an interview, I arrived a bit early to hopefully get a feel for how the interview would go. I had never met him before so I was a bit nervous about talking to one of video gaming's legends. Observing him you'd never know he's been in the industry for over 20 years. If he's jaded, he certainly doesn't show it. As he guided a group of VIPs from kiosk to kiosk showing off Majesco's latest offerings, Dan's face was lit up with glee as he showed off each game as if they were brand new to him (unlike some other robotic tours I had witnessed earlier). When his tour was over and he spotted me, he seemed just as eager to speak with me about the "good ol' days" at Activision, Absolute Entertainment, and his plans to visit Blobolonia.

Classic Gamer Magazine (CGM): Can you tell us about your background and how you got started with Activision?

Dan Kitchen (DK): I started in games in 1978 doing electronic handhelds with a company in New Jersey. We developed electronic handheld games for what was then Parker Brothers such as **Wildfire**, an Electronic LED pinball game and **Bankshot** an LED pool game. And then I gravitated into back engineering the Atari 2600



with a couple of products for Quaker Oats, **Space Jockey** and a few other games, and then came off into doing Apple software at the time for a company called Hayden Publishing. Then I started doing some Atari work for Coleco: **Donkey Kong** for the Atari 2600 and I worked on **Carnival** and **Time Pilot** and other titles like that. Then I joined Activision as a senior designer in 1982 and started with some other chaps the eastern design center. I did a number of titles for Activision until 1986, left there and founded Absolute Entertainment, which was a public software company that went public in '91, and did Super Nintendo, Sega Genesis. I left Absolute in 1995 to start Morningstar Multimedia, which did children's PC CD-ROM titles, and then got back into videogames contractually in 1998. I then joined Majesco right at the end of 1999. To my credit I probably have about 110 titles I've written, produced, directed, or at least in some managerial way, touched in the last 20-22 years.

CGM: Being an Apple II junkie, what were some of the titles you worked on for that system?

DK: I did **Crystal Caverns**, which was a text adventure at that point. Full sentence recognition and full paragraph recognition. Very much in the **Zork** line of products. **Crime Stopper** was a game I had de-

signed and written which was sort of a Sam Spade type of adventure game. I worked on a product called **Bellhop**, one called **Kamikaze** with another chap, and that was pretty much my Apple days before working on the 2600.

CGM: Any particular game or games really stand out as one of your crowning achievements from the classic days?

DK: Well, I wrote very quickly and played pretty well a title called **Kung Fu Master** for the Atari 2600. I did all the audio, all the graphics. Basically the whole thing soup to nuts. I had to write an editor to do all my graphics because the Atari 2600 wasn't really graphically based so we had to create the graphics on a scan line basis. So I had to create my own tools. I did that

within about four and a half months. I also did **Ghostbusters** for the Atari 2600 and **Tomcat the F-14** flight simulator.

CGM: It's pretty much legendary that you could determine how well an Activision game was going to do in the market based on the amount of play it got from the other programmers in the office. Would you say there was more of a good spirited competition between the designers regarding how far you could push the limits of the Atari or was it more of a cooperative atmosphere?

DK: It was a good spirited competition. We all tried to out do each other. Back in those days the fun was to be able to go to a tradeshow and look at a product and try to figure out how the guy did that. We would do the same thing in the lab. We would create something and have people come over and then we'd say, "tell me how I did that?". Because the machine only had two players, two missiles and one background playing and we were able, through repositioning of the players on a scan line basis of interrupting the raster, create more than two players per scan line and create tricks that were really difficult to do. As far as the spirited competition, we had that. I remember specifically one time, going back to California into the Activision lab and having lunch with Dave Crane, Bob Whitehead and Al

Miller and somebody saying how great Al Miller was at his **Ice Hockey** game. I said, "you know, I'm pretty good." And my brother Gary said, "yeah, I think Dan can beat AI." So at lunch we had a competition and lo and behold I ended up beating Al Miller at his own **Ice Hockey** game, and that was probably the high point of the competition that we had.

CGM: How about any brotherly competition? Was that ever any higher than the competition between you and your regular co-workers?

DK: No, I always looked up to my brothers. We would play games competitively, but working together we would always lean on each other. Garry had more of an artistic ability, so where I was a little less artistic at drawing he would come and help me with design issues, or color selections on the screen. But no, it never seemed to get in the way.

CGM: You mentioned the early trade-shows. Compared to the circus atmosphere of E3, what were those like?

DK: Well, they were similar, except the Consumer Electronic Show had all sorts of electronics. We were one section of the CES. But it was a bit quieter, it was a bit less circus oriented. I think certainly the noise level and an amount of the blitz was kept to a minimum. But it was still a trade-show so people were coming to look at our products and were going around seeing what everyone else had.

CGM: What were your reasons for leaving Activision in 1986?

DK: In 1986 Activision was really changing. The old regime had gone. The original guys, Jim Levy, Tom Lopez, they had all left and were now doing Commodore 64 games. They were downsizing. They wanted us to do products that weren't necessarily original. They wanted us to do a lot of ports of things on the East Coast at our design center. We said, 'you know we're really kind of creative guys and we don't want to necessarily be doing ports and what not. why don't we leave and form our own company and we'll come back and do development work for you?' And that's pretty much what we did. One of the actual last games I did on the Apple was a greeting card maker product for Activision in 1986, which they wanted us to do, but we left and did it contractually.

CGM: That brings me to the question I have to ask. Were there any games or lost prototypes that you may have in your possession, which were never released?

DK: I actually have lost prototypes of games I had designed for the Atari 2600. I had designed two games at Activision that



didn't make it out. It would've been called in the lab, **The Levy Game**, and he looked like the cop from **Keystone Kapers** with a yellow slicker standing against a dam like Hoover Dam. With three or four levels of play the dam would shake, the lights would go off and water would sprout and begin to fill up and pour onto the screen. The whole screen would begin to fill up blue. You had to run around and clean the little holes and cement them. And obviously as the game ensued water began to fill up, you had to go underwater and you had a little life meter. That was one game I had done. I had also done a sequel to **Keystone Kapers**, which was the Keystone cop on a train. And that was actually a neat thing because I was able to pull off some interesting software kernels where I had eight rotating wheels on the bottom of a train where you could normally only have two or six. † was a very cute game. From screen to screen, from boxcar to boxcar fighting and trying to defeat the character from **Keystone Kapers**, who was the runaway criminal. That was a very huge



game as it had non-symmetrical play and had a really nice, large engine at the front of the game and a very large caboose at the bottom of the game, and I'm sure somewhere I have those roms. Probably worth something out on the open market!

CGM: I would say so! Any chance we'll ever see those roms in some way, shape or form?

DK: Yeah, I'm sure they are in one of my two off site facilities. I'm starting to clean those out, so I'm sure at some point they will surface.

CGM: Those would be great to see and play! At Absolute you ended up helping to create **A Boy and His Blob**. Can you tell us more about that?

DK: I helped found Absolute and I worked with David Crane who was the lead designer of **A Boy and His Blob**. Garry, Dave, and I helped put it together. It was a product that was critically acclaimed on the NES when it first came out did very well. We never brought it to the Super Nintendo platform, but we brought it to the Game Boy platform and just recently Majesco has gone on to buy the rights for the Game Boy Advance.

CGM: Can you tell us any more about the GBA title? We're only seeing a small blurb on your monitor on the show floor, but we're not really getting the full scope of it. Is it a direct port or an entirely new adventure?

DK: It's a completely new adventure! In essence the Blob has returned to Earth and has befriended a boy by the name of Jersey. Jersey lives in the city and he notices the Blob come back to Earth, befriends him and notices when he feeds him certain jelly beans (the Blob) morphs into various objects. The Blob, in essence, is coming back looking for five lost comrades he had to leave on Earth when he left the last time. You're going around the world using the Blob as a tool to try and find these comrades and bring them back to the Blob ship. When you bring back all five other Blob's you actually fly off to an adventure in Blobolonia where you have to defeat the evil Blob emperor. Then you realize that the five Blobs that you rescued are actually part of the royal family, and the Blob is actually a prince. So the game ensues until you defeat the evil Blob emperor at the end. It takes you through an urban city with construction sites. It takes you through an Amazon world. It takes you through oceans and lighthouse areas. It takes you through a number of very beautifully designed backgrounds. We have ex-Disney animators creating 2D animation for us. So it's promising to be a very nice title for 2002.

CGM: Any chance we'll see it on any other systems other than Game Boy Advance?

DK: I think there are plans to put it on Gamecube, but we just want to see how it does on GBA.

CGM: It seems we're seeing a lot of the classic titles such as *Pitfall*, *Earthworm Jim* and *Frogger* on the Game Boy color as well as the Game Boy Advance. I'm assuming you're behind this?

DK: Some of it. I did *Frogger* for Game Boy Color and Game Boy black and white and *Frogger 2* for GBC which we did last year and did very well and won several awards for us. Combined, thru Majesco I've designed three *Frogger* games on the GBC and we did about a million and a half pieces total. On Game Boy Advance we haven't gotten that title. Actually Konami is doing that one. Some of the classic games I helped these guys. I did *Pong* on the GBC. Some of our games like *M&M's Party* is in essence a game like *Mario Party* board games and on the board games you get to play a variety of mini games. Many of the mini-games are reminiscent of the games we did years ago on the Atari 2600.

CGM: So are you still programming quite a bit yourself?

DK: Actually, no, I'm really directing and developing and designing. I'm not doing much programming because I have a lab of people I manage and have games to get out the door so I really don't have time.

CGM: No time to ever break out the old system and have the desire to create another Atari 2600 game?

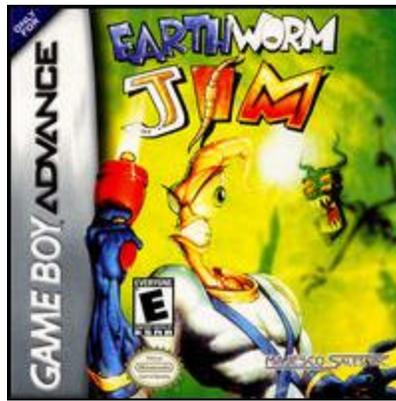
DK: You know I've often dreamed about tearing out my old Atari and playing with it and creating and seeing some of the old games.

CGM: When would you say was the last time you cracked open an Atari and really dove into some of the old games to play just for fun?

DK: Last time we did that was probably about a year ago.

CGM: Any particular games?

DK: *Megamania* was one. *Human Cannonball* was another that was reminiscent of putting a guy in a cannon and firing him out. You can see our *Fortess* has some elements of that where you can get some kamikaze Twerps you can load up in a cannon and fire at various places. So (*Human Cannonball*) kind of inspired us to future titles like that.



CGM: Any personal projects on the side you can tell us about?

DK: I like to go sailing and I have an 8-year-old daughter so we play a lot of videogames together.

CGM: What kind of games do you like to play nowadays?

DK: I had gotten into the first person shooter. I'm very excited about the *Medal of Honor* titles. Games that have a historic base, that aren't just random violence. Games that historically capture the essence of the time period. I like those very much.

CGM: As far as your 8 year old daughter goes, what does she like to play?

DK: She plays *Medal of Honor* with me occasionally. She particularly likes to test some of the games we have. She likes a lot of the Disney titles.

CGM: Ever show her any of the old Atari stuff?

DK: I actually brought up the PSX One compilation from Activision, which I have a number of titles on there. She was most impressed that I had done that many years ago.

CGM: Any other titles you'd like to promote?

DK: *Dark Arena* is a first person shooter that is after my own heart of what we're playing on the PC's and PS2's. *Aerial Aces*, a product that I have great hopes for. It's a four-player combat plane game. And what I did was I envisioned recreating that title from the memories I had from playing the old Atari Lynx game,

Warbirds. Very fun game we used to play for hours in our office. About four or five months ago I began to research where the original programmer was and found him living in San Mateo. I called him up out of the blue, he was an old Atari guy from years past by the name of Rob Zdybel. I said, 'Hey Rob, you don't know me, we're doing *Aerial Aces* and my vision is *Warbirds* if you want to write it for me.' And he said, 'Sure!'. We now have the original guy who did *Warbirds* ten years ago on the Lynx, basically doing the same thing for us on the GBA. We have high hopes that this will be just as good.

CGM: Any chance we'll be seeing you at the CGExpo in Las Vegas this August?

DK: I have four titles for Christmas. I need to have those beta'd between July 15th and August. If some of them run late I probably will not (attend).

CGM: We can understand that, and we don't get me wrong, we do want you there, but if you can't make it, can you send those prototype ROM's?

DK: If I can make it I certainly will. I may actually find them and hand carry them in and surprise everyone. I actually probably had a couple other 2600 games that I tinkered with. I had actually a first person submarine simulator in which you were looking through a periscope. Kind of like the old *Sea Wolf* game. I know I have that somewhere, so I may just show up and surprise people with games that haven't been seen in a while.

Thanks to Dan for taking the time to speak with us. Judging from the titles Majesco is releasing, it appears 2001-2002 will be a banner year for both Majesco and classic gaming enthusiasts.

