retro* GAMER

AMSTRAD | COMMODORE | SEGA | NINTENDO | ATARI | SINCLAIR | NEO GEO | SONY | COIN-OP | MOBILE

SCORE 000174320 **BLOCK** B-3
PLAYER **ENEMY** ♥=38 P=05
TIME 680

ULTIMATE GUIDE
SUPER CASTLEVANIA IV
IS KONAMI'S 16-BIT EPIC
THE BEST IN THE SERIES?

THE MAKING OF
KARATEKA
JORDAN MECHNER REVISITS
HIS INFLUENTIAL ACTION GAME

THE LEGACY OF
MONKEY ISLAND

RON GILBERT, DAVE GROSSMAN AND
TIM SCHAFER RETURN TO THE HIGH
SEAS TO SPIN US SOME EPIC YARNS

GUITAR HERO
HOW HARMONIX STRUCK A
CHORD WITH THIS RHYTHM
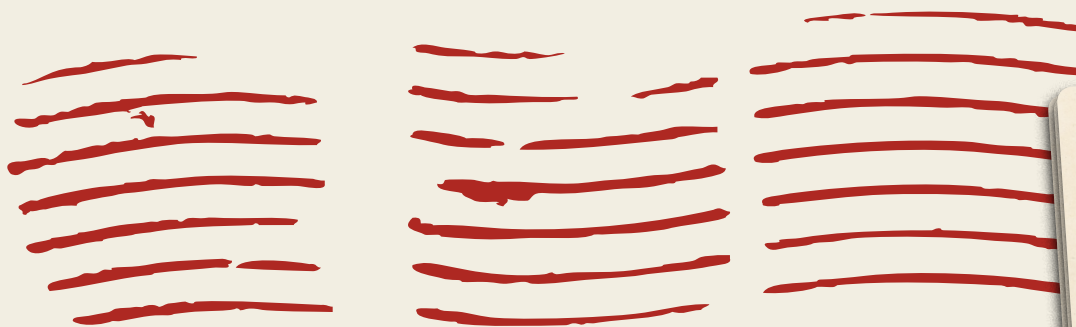ACTION CLASSIC

THE MAKING OF
GAMES WORLD
THE VIDEATORS TAKE US BEHIND THE
SCENES OF THE POPULAR TV SHOW

POOL OF
RADIANCE
DISCOVER HOW SSI'S
PIONEERING D&D GAME
SCORED A CRITICAL HIT

commodore 64

ESSENTIALS
TO COLLECT

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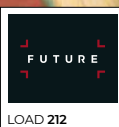
ALSO
INSIDE
BATTLETOADS
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DARKWING DUCK
MUSHA ALESTE
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SILPHEED
**FAMICOM DISK
SYSTEM**
JUMPING FLASH!
PC-FX

Dan Kitchen

What cherished games would you take to the island?

In a career stretching across four decades, Dan Kitchen has worked on over 180 games, as a coder, designer and producer. Join us on a journey from the Atari 2600 to the Xbox and back again

Words by Paul Drury

With such a staggering number of titles to his name, we have taken inspiration from Jacques' 'seven ages of man' speech in Shakespeare's *As You Like It* to discuss Dan Kitchen's gigantic back catalogue. Here, we present the 'seven ages of Dan'…

We begin with the age of the infant. Dan was born and raised in New Jersey, USA, and spent his formative years surrounded by technology. His father loved tinkering with electronics, and in the late Sixties, his older brother Steve constructed a desk-sized computer from component parts in their basement. "He's the one who got me interested in electronics," says Dan. "After high school, I was all set to go to university but Steve had gone to work for a local company, Wickstead Design Associates, making electronic gadgets for cars. They got into making toys and games and my other brother Garry ended up working there, too."

Garry created the hugely popular handheld game *Bank Shot* for Parker Brothers, and in 1979 Dan joined his siblings at the company. "How could I not," smiles Dan. "I loved them both. The age difference negated any rivalry. I looked up to them."

The second age of man is the whining schoolboy, reluctantly dragging himself to class, but Dan's enthusiasm for electronics and programming made him a very willing student. He collaborated with Garry on the handheld LED pinball game *Wildfire*, released in 1979, and in the same year, he acquired an Apple II. "I was a big fan of *Microsoft Adventure* and all of Scott Adams' games," he grins. "I fell in love with text adventures instantly and knew I wanted to make my own."

By this time, Steve had departed from Wickstead and moved west, and with their eldest brother gone, Garry and Dan decided to set up their own company, ISS (Imaginative Systems Software). They secured a contract with Hayden Software, a local book publisher wanting a slice of the growing computer games market, to write six Apple II games. Having taught himself assembly language, Dan released his first text adventure, *Crystal Caverns*, in 1982, earning the tidy sum of $6,000 for his efforts. The game was a fairly traditional treasure hunt set beneath a spooky mansion, but for his second title Dan cast the player as private investigator Al Clubs, grandson of 'a famous detective of another era and another suit', on the trail of an abducted heiress.

"The idea for *Crime Stopper* came from one of my brother's friends, Barry Marx, a writer and a brilliant chap. He suggested he write the story and I would make it interactive using my *Crystal Caverns* engine. And he's responsible for the Sam Spade pun," Dan assures us.

As Dan created his adventure games, his brother Garry sat on an adjacent desk in their basement studio, also using an Apple II but, having exploited the open architecture of the machine, he was using it to code games not for home computers but for consoles. The brothers were about to play with the big boys.

And so we come to the age of the lover. Dan's great paramour was the Atari 2600, but in 1981 it was hard for anyone outside Atari and the newly formed Activision to even get a first date with the wood-veneered beauty.

"I was only able to code for the 2600 because Garry reverse-engineered the machine and created a 4K board we could plug into a slot at the back of the Apple II," he explains. "Garry wrote the game *Space Jockey* [published by US Games] and then got the deal to convert *Donkey Kong*. Once I'd finished *Crime Stopper*, I started learning about coding for the 2600 and began to make a game with flowerpots and called it *Flower Power*…"

It was the seed of an idea which would eventually grow into *Crackpots*, his first 2600 game (see **RG203** for

Dan (left) and Garry in 1969. They already had a homemade computer in their basement built by elder brother Steve.

Trivia

Dan once met Tom Hanks on the moon… that is, the lunar set of IMAX movie *Magnificent Desolation: Walking On The Moon 3D*. The proposed spin-off game sadly never came to fruition.

FIRST JOB
Cashier at a
convenience store

CURRENT JOB
President and CEO of
Tiki Interactive

FAVOURITE FILM
The Big Lebowski

FAVOURITE ALBUM
Quiet Village: The Exotic
Sounds of Martin Denny

FAVOURITE BOOK:
Treasure Island

FIRST COMPUTER/CONSOLE
Apple II

FAVOURITE COMPUTER/CONSOLE
Atari 2600

BESTSELLING PRODUCT:
Frogger for the Game
Boy. It sold almost
5 million copies

BEST HOLIDAY
In 1993 I was working on
the Disney game Goofy's
Hysterical History Tour
and was invited to attend
the Disney Licensing Expo
in Orlando, Florida. That
was great!

WHO YOU WANT TO BE STRANDED WITH
My love Carolyn,
of course

212-0681051030320681117103

SEX
M

NAME
Dan Kitchen

YEAR OF BIRTH
????

PLACE OF BIRTH
Teaneck,
New Jersey

BIOGRAPHY
Dan coded Atari 2600/VCS games for Activision
and founded development studio Imagineering and
Absolute Entertainment with his brother Garry.

"We had a photo of the four
Activision founders with our
faces drawn over theirs.
We would say, 'One day, we
will be those guys'"
Dan Kitchen

Praise For Dan

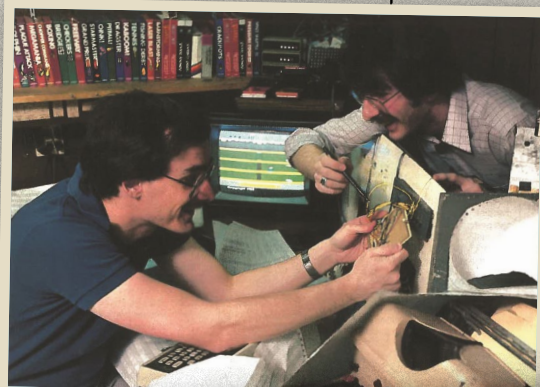Here's what **Retro Gamer** has to say about Dan Kitchen's work…

Darran Jones
I've played a lot of Dan's games, particularly *Crackpots* and *River Raid II*, but the best surprise from reading this article is knowing that he was involved with *Jaws Unleashed*. I own this on the Xbox and it's always been a favourite of mine, so I know someone else to contact now for my planned article.

Paul Drury
I had the pleasure of meeting Dan at the Free Play Florida pinball and videogame show in 2019 and was struck by his warmth, candour and taste in Hawaiian shirts. He has had a hand in more games than anyone I've interviewed over the last 16 years and he hasn't stopped making them yet.

▶ the full 'Making Of' article), but first Dan and Garry – who had been joined at ISS by Garry's brother-in-law, Kevin Calcutt, and John Van Ryzin – were courted by both Atari and Activision. "We visited Atari first and walked through the lab where games were being developed," Dan recalls. "Garry and I were talking about our skillset and how we'd like to be credited for our work. The guy showing us around said, 'Credited? I could get towel designers to do what you do.'"

They returned to New Jersey disheartened, but the next week they were flown out to Activision's HQ in California and had a very different experience. "I remember the only other person on the upper deck of the plane was Marty Feldman," chuckles Dan. "They wined and dined us. We were already enamoured by Activision before we visited them. We actually had a photo of the four founders up on our wall at ISS with our faces drawn over theirs. Garry would say, 'One day, we will be those guys.'"

And now, they were. Sort of. They joined Activision but rather than move to the West Coast, they became the company's East Coast design division, staying in New Jersey, deliberately kept separate from the original quartet of game creators in California, with the hope they would bring a different perspective to making 2600 titles. They were installed in a plush office and paid handsomely – Dan's starting salary in 1981 was $17,000 with a bonus of up to $30,000. "We felt like we had arrived," beams Dan. "We were given the freedom to create. It was like *The Beatles*, the four of us coming together, like a band. It was a magical time."

Dan (left) and Garry tinker with MANIAC, the computer built by eldest brother Steve, in a feature from Enter magazine, June 1984.
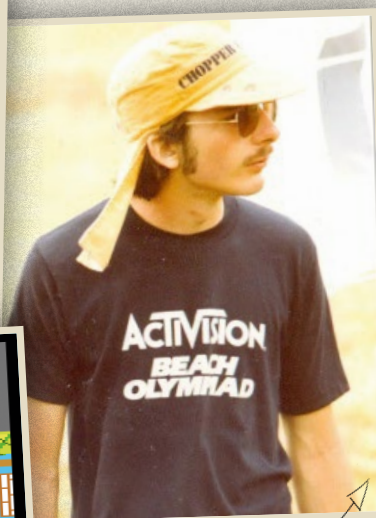

Kung-Fu Master brought feet of fury to the Atari 7800.

Dan on the beach in 1982, when Activision sent all their employees and partners on a week-long vacation to Maui. We miss the Eighties.

> **"I fell in love with text adventures instantly and knew I wanted to make my own"**
> *Dan Kitchen*

The fab four produced some magical games, including Dan's aforementioned *Crackpots*, Garry's *Keystone Kapers* and the brilliant *HERO* by John Van Ryzin, until the infamous videogame crash in the US broke the spell.

The fourth age of man is the soldier and Dan was on the frontline during the 2600 civil war, which would see the superpowers of Atari and Activision attacked from all sides. "My brother saw it coming," sighs Dan. "One evening in 1983, Garry and I stopped off at a Video Shack store. We often did to see how our games were doing, and we saw a game not by Atari or Activision. It was *Skeet Shoot* by Games By Apollo. Garry looked at the screenshot on the box and said, 'The industry is dead.' He knew that if people could make games for the 2600 but with no willingness to make them good, everyone would jump in and flood the market with poorly designed games. And he was right."

The influx of substandard titles, as well as some questionable financial decisions by the management at Atari, led to a collapse in confidence in the whole console business. All was not lost, however. The home computer market remained largely unaffected, so Activision redirected its developers to produce games for an array of home micros. Dan stopped work on the sequel to *Keystone Kapers* and began working on a number of Commodore 64 titles, including *The Rocky Horror Show*. Did he go full 'method coder' and program in fishnet stockings and a basque, we wonder?

"Almost," he smirks. "I loved the Commodore 64. I was one of many programmers on that game. It had actually been designed in England but I coded here in New Jersey and I was pleased with how it came out. Though I still can't do the Time Warp."

By 1986, it was time for the Kitchen boys to do a jump to the left. Activision closed its East Coast division and with their hand rather than forced, the brothers established their own game development studio, Imagineering. "Frankly, we were happy to leave," says Dan. "It wasn't the same Activision and we'd become disillusioned with it. The NES was out and we didn't think they were focusing on the right areas. We were itching to do our own thing."

So we arrive at the age of the justice, characterised by wisdom and experience, and the brothers applied both to

Timeline

1983

CRACKPOTS
■ **YEAR:** 1983
■ **FORMAT:** Atari 2600
Dan's 2600 debut was this excellent Activision-produced title, which tasks you with defending a building from swarms of sewer bugs through judicious plant pot-pushing.
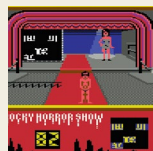
1985

THE ROCKY HORROR SHOW
■ **YEAR:** 1985
■ **FORMAT:** C64
Playing as either Brad or Janet, this collect-'em-up has you wandering round Frank-N-Furter's kooky mansion, piecing together the De-Medusa in minimal clothing.

1988

RIVER RAID II
■ **YEAR:** 1988
■ **FORMAT:** Atari 2600
Dan designed this follow-up to Carol Shaw's seminal shooter, expanding the levels, adding in new enemies and allowing you to alter your altitude.

1989

TOMCAT: THE F-14 FIGHTER SIMULATOR
■ **YEAR:** 1989
■ **FORMAT:** Atari 7800
Dan worked on many flight sims, most with some element of combat, and he is especially proud of this one, which was prefixed with his name.

Though Penn And Teller: Smoke And Mirrors was never released, it has gained a cult status, mainly for the Desert Bus eight-hour 'minigame'.

Double Dragon's battling brothers were not modelled on Dan and Garry Kitchen.

Games On Film

Dan was accustomed to turning films into videogames, but in 2006 his games actually featured on the big screen. "I got a call from Sony one day, saying they had a film coming out about videogames and could we help them," he explains. "It was *Grandma's Boy*, produced by Adam Sandler. I'd got a game called *Demonik* in development, which I thought would be great to centre the film around. I told them I'd been in the business over 20 years, so if they wanted a videogame studio to look right, I could help!" Dan assisted with the set design as well as delivering the brilliantly titled *Eternal Death Slayer 3*, which shines in a film that combines the subtle wit of *American Pie* with the artistic vision of *Joysticks*.

their new venture. Dan worked on such games as *Destroyer Escort*, *Flight Of The Intruder* and the Apple II conversion of *Little Computer People* for a variety of publishers, including his former employer. He also collaborated with his sibling on Garry Kitchen's GameMaker, helping with the bulk of the demos that came with the package to showcase its potential. "It was such a brilliant tool," enthuses Dan. "I used it to convert Dave Crane's *Pitfall!* for the C64 in just two weeks. You could do amazing things with it! As I was producing the demos, I would say, 'Hey Garry, can I have an instruction that does this?' and he'd add in new tools to give you more power."

Imagineering built up a strong relationship with Nintendo, producing many titles for the NES and later the SNES, including a string of *Simpsons* games. "We were big fans of the show," says Dan. "Matt Groening would send us reference material and it was all very exciting. Games like *Bart Vs The Space Mutants* and *Bart Vs The World* were so big, we each took a world or two to code, and I liked putting Bart in fantasy places, like on a pirate ship or in Ancient Egypt. We were given a lot of creative freedom."

From the late Eighties right through to the mid-Nineties, Dan worked on an array of licensed games, from *Ren & Stimpy* to *Attack Of The Killer Tomatoes*. His approach was always to immerse himself in the source material, once spending ten hours straight watching *Rocky & Bullwinkle* cartoons in preparation for a Game Boy title, and endeavoured to include little 'Easter eggs' for fans of the show. Did he ever worry that a licence might not actually provide a viable videogame scenario, we ask?

"Oh yeah – *Home Improvement*," he laughs, rolling his eyes. "We got a deal to do a *Goofy* game for the Sega Genesis, and after that, Disney started showing us other licences they had and one of those was *Home Improvement*. It was going for a song! It was a hit ▶

Kitchen On Kitchen

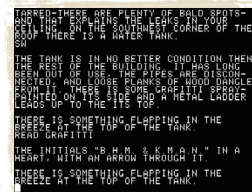### Dan picks his three favourite projects

■ CRACKPOTS
"*Crackpots* was my first Atari 2600 game for Activision. Playing it brings me back to those early days, which were the best times of my career."

■ CRYSTAL CAVERNS
"My first published game. I love playing text adventure games because they transport you to another world created completely by your imagination."

■ CRIME STOPPER
"I worked with a professional writer to create the storyline. I've always loved mysteries and many of the detective films from the Forties."

1991

BART VS THE SPACE MUTANTS
■ YEAR: 1991
■ FORMAT: NES
Yellow was the new black in the Nineties and Dan tapped into *Simpsons* mania with a string of tie-in titles, starting with this tough side-scroller.

1994

HOME IMPROVEMENT
■ YEAR: 1994
■ FORMAT: SNES
Proving you could make a game from pretty much any licence, this uses Tim Allen's popular sitcom as the basis for some solid platforming with added power tools.
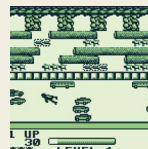

1998

FROGGER
■ YEAR: 1998
■ FORMAT: Game Boy
Gamers never tire of asking why the frog crossed the road and this fine handheld version sold millions. We shall be talking to prolific coder Dave Lubar in a future **RG**.
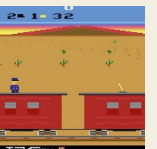

2020

GOLD RUSH
■ YEAR: 2020
■ FORMAT: Atari 2600
Though the title had to be changed for copyright reasons, this is essentially *Keystone Kapers Kannonball*, the game Dan began back in 1983. Look out for the Kickstarter!

Taxi Driver on the PlayStation 2: "You looking at me?"

Readers' Questions

RetroBob: Tell us some Penn and Teller stories!

They were wonderful chaps. I remember one meeting when Penn said, 'I want to make the most boring videogame ever. You're driving a bus from Tucson, Arizona to Las Vegas in real time. Can you guys do that?' And so the minigame *Desert Bus* was born. Fucking brilliant! The game was finished but never got released. I asked them in 2015 if I could release it on mobile to mark the 20th anniversary, and we talked for six months until Penn and Teller said they liked the fact it was underground and off the radar.

Merman: What was your worst experience of 'crunch' to get a game finished?

Ghostbusters for the Atari 2600. I had to write that game in 12 weeks from beginning to end. I was almost hospitalised at the end I was so exhausted. I got mono and was totally wiped out… but I did it!

Cafeman: What do you think is missing from today's popular console games, if anything?

The ability to plug in and play. With modern games, you've always got load times. Gameplay-wise, in some cases it can feel like you're playing prerendered movies. Your character has beautiful animation but then you have to stop and press a button for them to perform an action and that can disconnect the player.

Learnedrobb: Of all the systems you worked on, which do you feel forced you to be most creative?

Definitely the Atari 2600. I had no graphic chip, minimal memory, nothing to help me control what is on-screen, just the television raster and some registers.

FGasking: Any games that you worked on that were pretty much finished but never got released?

Hyper Space Delivery Boy. It was an incredible adventure game full of such detail. John Romero created it with Tom Hall and it has so much love built into it. They created a GBA version of it for us but the retailers said they couldn't sell it so it never got released, which was sad because it was such fun.
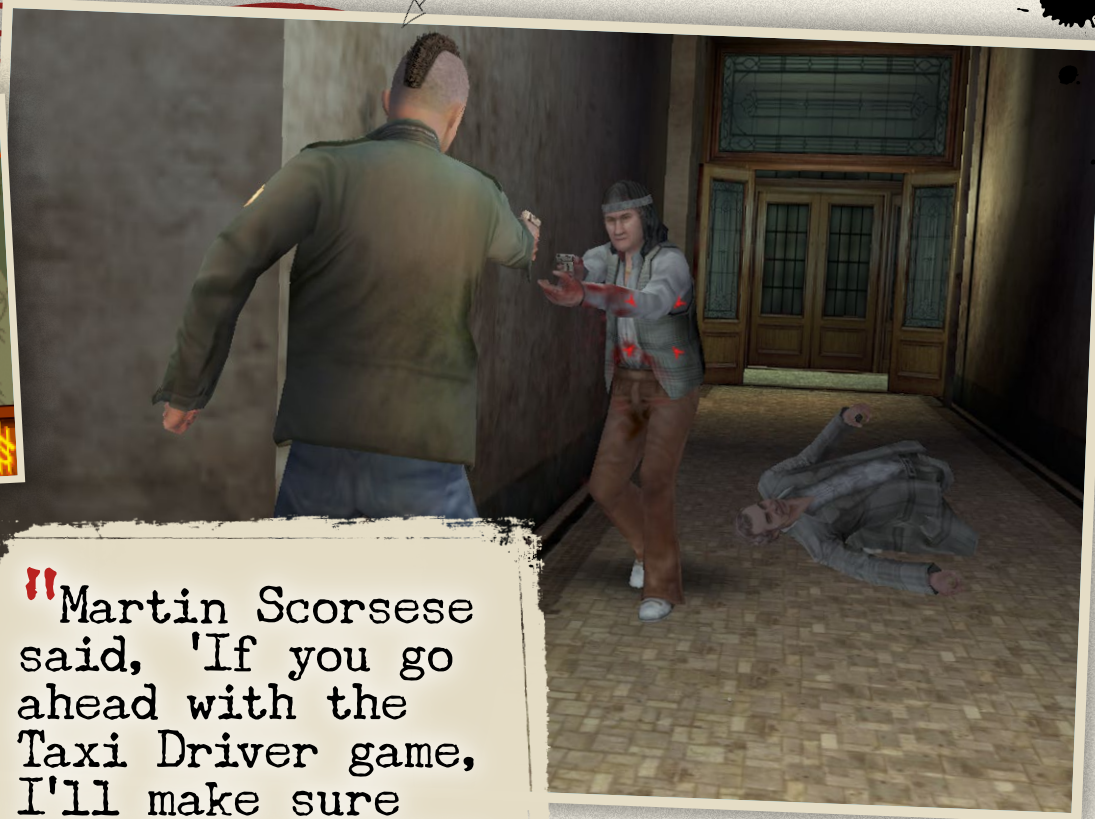
> **"Martin Scorsese said, 'If you go ahead with the Taxi Driver game, I'll make sure you never license another fucking movie again"**
> *Dan Kitchen*

▶ TV show and they wanted to expand the brand. I codesigned [the game]. We met Tim Allen and the team on the set, and of course, it was a Hollywood sound stage – so any other sound stage could be right next door…"

Dan's ingenious approach meant players could dispatch dinosaurs and mummies with blowtorches and staple guns in a game described as, '*Pitfall!* with power tools'. He took a similarly imaginative approach to tie-in games as diverse as *Casper The Interactive Adventure* and *Kristi Yamaguchi Fantasy Ice Skating*, and his ability to secure big-name licences would prepare him for the new millennium.

Now we step into the age of the pantaloon. No, this is not the age when men wear ridiculous trousers. In commedia dell'arte, a popular form of theatre in the 16th century, the 'pantaloon' is a principal character, synonymous with wealth and status. And money was certainly coming Dan's way. "In the late Nineties, I was introduced to Majesco, a little company that needed games," he recalls. "Morris Sutton, the founder and CEO, had found a niche remaking old titles at a budget price. He asked me if I knew the game *Frogger*. I replied, 'Sure, I love it.' He said, 'Here's £100,000. Make it for the Game Boy. And do you know this game…?' By the time I walked out of there, I had a deal worth half a million dollars to write five games. He literally threw money at me."

Dan put his team together, which included old Imagineering employees such as Dave Lubar, and delivered the quintet in six months. That was enough to get him hired as VP of handheld development for Majesco and he oversaw a myriad titles across both Nintendo and Sony handhelds,

including many old Atari titles via a deal with Hasbro. "In that first year, we brought in around $22 million dollars in revenue. I made Morris a disgusting amount of money."

If you needed more evidence that Dan was at the top table when it came to videogame deals, listen to his tale of licensing *Taxi Driver* for the PS2. "We'd paid $250,000 for the licence and paid the developers $1.25 million upfront to get the game completed. The game was about three quarters complete when I get a call from Sony telling me we had a problem. I asked what the issue was and they replied, 'Marty doesn't want you to do the game.' I was like, 'Marty who… wait, you mean Martin Scorsese? Holy shit!' I reminded them we'd already paid out $1.5 million on this game and we couldn't just kill it. They said, 'Marty says if you go ahead, he'll make sure you never licence another fucking movie again.' We cancelled it. Just like that. And I'd spent the last six months securing a deal to get Robert De Niro to do the voiceover for Travis Bickle, too!"

Though Shakespeare views the final age of man as a descent into senility, Dan has managed to revisit his childhood with his cognitive abilities intact. Spurred on by the discovery of the prototype of his unfinished sequel to *Keystone Kapers* in his off-site storage facility, he decided to rewrite the game from scratch and plans a Kickstarter campaign to facilitate a physical release of the game later this year. "It's a better game now than it was back in 1983 because I'm a better coder now," he grins. "It was the game I started after *Crackpots* and I did seven more VCS games after that. I've learned a lot more."

The process has rekindled his love for developing for the Atari 2600 and Dan has already begun a second game. "I was sitting in a tiki bar in California and I thought, 'What kind of game would Steve Cartwright do?' I've always admired his games, like *Barnstorming*, and I love those Cunard posters of transatlantic liners. I imagined the Activision rainbow coming out of the smokestacks as you cross the ocean from New York to Southampton, dodging icebergs and picking up shipwrecked stragglers. The title came to me in an instant – *Bon Voyage*!"

Long may your journey continue, Dan. ✱

Trivia

Dan's paternal grandparents were English and he is a distant relative of our most famous army recruiter, Lord Kitchener. "If Trump gets re-elected, will you ask the queen if she'll please take me back?" he pleads.