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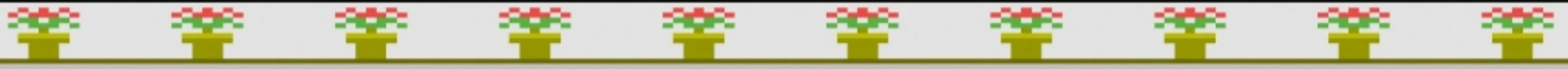
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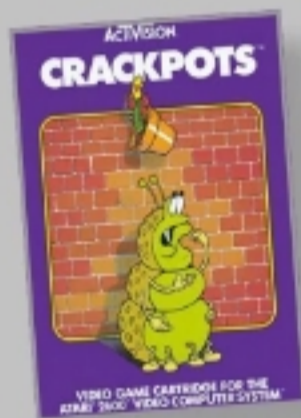
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THE MAKING OF CRACKPOTS



This cute action game is a classic example of how Activision pushed the Atari 2600 to its limits. We caught up with creator Dan Kitchen at the Free Play Florida show to talk sprite switching and sewer bugs

WORDS BY PAUL DRURY

IN THE KNOW

- » PUBLISHER: ACTIVISION
- » DEVELOPER: DAN KITCHEN
- » RELEASED: 1983
- » PLATFORM: ATARI 2600
- » GENRE: ACTION

For Sir Isaac Newton and his theory of gravitation, inspiration came from an apple falling on his head. For Dan Kitchen, was it a similar incident involving a plant pot that gave him the idea for *Crackpots*, we wonder?

"It didn't actually hit me on the head," chuckles Dan, "but I was having lunch with my brother Garry and Dave [Crane - Activision cofounder] who was visiting us in our town of Glen Rock, New Jersey, back in 1982. There was a construction site across the street and I did see a pack of plants fall from scaffolding. I just thought, 'That would be fun to do...'"

This painless epiphany lead to Dan's first game for the Atari 2600, which required your character, Potsy, to defend his building against an onslaught of giant insects by pushing pots off the rooftop and crushing the critters. Previously, he had worked on handheld games including *Wildfire*, an electronic take on pinball released in the UK by Palitoy, but he and his brother were eager to get into console development, so they attended the



Dan (far right) at the Free Play Florida show with (left to right) his brother Garry, Activision cofounder David Crane and your correspondent.

CES show in January 1982 and were approached by both Atari and Activision. "Both companies wined and dined us," smiles Dan, "but we knew from the games we'd played that Activision was the one we wanted to join."

Dan was one of five coders who constituted Activision's new East Coast office and all were given a free hand to develop their own titles, initially using an Apple II which was superseded



[Atari 2600] There's a real sense of satisfaction if you manage to crush multiple bugs with a single pot.

by a PDP-11 development system sent over from the company's head office in California. "I drew the flowerpots, made them drop from the ledge and liked how it looked," explains Dan. "Dave came out to see the initial screen and I remember him saying the curb where the bugs came out was the wrong colour. You see, in New Jersey yellow means a no parking zone but over in California, it's red!"

It was this kind of attention to detail which typified the design ethos at Activision and it can be seen in the many sweet touches that Dan included in *Crackpots*. Note how Potsy leans forward to tip the pots off the ledge as he flits across the rooftop and successfully striking an invading insect sees them fade out gracefully. "The little touches are what make a good game into a great game I think," nods Dan. "That effect needed a little bit of trickery to go through the colour palette of the spider... sorry, 'sewer bug'!"

Yes, though Dan imagined he'd created waves of antagonistic arachnids, marketing renamed them sewer bugs, alluding to the drains from whence they came. Whatever their genus, they offer an increasingly difficult challenge. Black bugs head



DEVELOPER HIGHLIGHTS

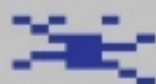
CRYSTAL CAVERNS
SYSTEM: APPLE II,
COMMODORE 64
YEAR: 1982

**DAN KITCHEN'S
TOMCAT: THE F-14
FIGHTER SIMULATOR
(PICTURED)**
SYSTEM: ATARI 2600,
ATARI 7800
YEAR: 1989

GHOSTBUSTERS II
SYSTEM: NES
YEAR: 1990



If you scored over 75,000 points on *Crackpots* you qualified for one of Activision's famous patches.





[Atari 2600] If six bugs get into your building, they chew through a whole floor.



[Atari 2600] Dan did consider using the paddle controllers, a nod to the 'Kaboom!' in reverse' gameplay.

“The little touches are what make a good game into a great game I think”
Dan Kitchen

straight for one of the six windows in your buildings but then blue and red bugs start to meander their way up the wall, making hitting them with a well-timed pot-drop a tricky task. By the time you get to the green bugs, which zigzag like drunken bishops, defending your home becomes a frantic battle, especially as everything speeds up with each wave cleared. Fortunately, instead of being granted the traditional three 'lives', players were allocated six 'bonus bugs' at the start of each level. One was lost for each enemy that made it through an upstairs window and if six got past your defences, they would chew through the floorboards and the whole building would come shuddering down a floor.

“I thought it was a unique effect,” grins Dan. “If the bugs were getting into your building and munching on it, it had to be getting smaller! And that of course gives you less time to react next level. The real challenge was getting multiple flowerpots dropping and multiple spiders climbing up the building. You see, the Atari only really has five sprites or objects, so I had to use repositioning



[Atari 2600] The erratic movements of the green sewer bugs make them a tough challenge, especially on higher levels.

code and get it all to synchronise. And the mandate from Activision was 'no flickering!' We'd work for weeks to remove even the slightest pixel of error in our products. It had to look perfect.”

Crackpots is indeed both visually and technically impressive and a 2600

game that really deserves wider recognition. Sadly, its release in 1983 coincided with the infamous videogame crash in the USA. “It hit the shelves for \$30 when there were games selling for \$2 so I don't think it had a chance,” he sighs. “There was a TV commercial made but I'm not even sure it was aired. You can see it on my website. But I can tell you, we would've created these games even if they weren't sold. It was so much fun, especially on the Atari, and the excitement you had when you hit that switch and saw your creation light up from your imagination... that inspired us to make more and more of these games.”

And Dan hasn't quite finished with the Atari 2600 yet. Back in 1983, he began work on a sequel to his brother's game *Keystone Kapers*, this time set aboard a railroad in the Old West, but the aforementioned crash meant it was never completed, a fact that had always bothered him. Then in 2018, he found the only surviving copy of the unfinished game in a dusty storage unit. “I'd been thinking about what I could do with it for over 30 years and I'm better now on the system than I was back then. I didn't have the rights to the original name so I've called it *Gold Rush* and you should be able to buy the finished game this year!”

You can visit dankitchengames.com for more information and news on Dan's work.



CRACKING IT

DAN PROVIDES HELPFUL HIGH SCORE TIPS



SIDEWALKING

Try to hit the bugs while they're crawling along the sidewalk or when they're just coming out of the sewer. The closer they get to the windows, the less time you'll have to react.



THREE IS THE KEY

Later on, bugs crawl too fast for you to get them all, so focus on guarding three windows in the middle. It's okay if a few get past as you only need to kill seven out of 12 bugs to advance.



COLOUR CODING

Note that the red bugs end up two windows away from where they began their diagonal climb, and while the building is high, the green bugs end up at the window above where they began.

