

The

WAYBACK

Machine



by David Ellis

Documenting Dirk: *Inside the Dragon's Lair*

It's pretty obvious to anyone who has been following this column for the past couple of years that I'm a video game history buff. I grab every book on the subject that hits the shelf, attend as many classic game shows as I possibly can, and jump at the chance to talk to anyone and everyone who was involved with making video games in early years of the industry.

Unfortunately, historical accounts of the video game industry have typically been fairly hard to come by. Unlike other forms of entertainment like theater, film, and music, video games are still (relatively speaking) in their infancy. Despite the huge strides that have been made in the medium over the last couple of decades, video games just haven't been around that long. Think about it—a mere 40 years ago, video games didn't even exist!

Over the last few years, as the kids who grew up when coin-ops ruled the malls have gotten older, historical accounts of the "good old days" have become more plentiful. Lately, the trend has been toward films rather than books, though. Documentaries like *King of Kong* and *Chasing Ghosts*, while not exactly mainstream, have won critical acclaim for their accounts of classic game-related stories (if not precisely history).

I was recently contacted by Martin Touhey, an independent filmmaker, who informed me of his current project. Touhey is currently in the process of producing a classic game documentary that focuses on the history of one of the most memorable games of the golden age of coin-op—the game that started the laser craze, *Dragon's Lair*.

Touhey, who is a graphic designer by day, has always wanted to be a filmmaker. *Inside the Dragon's Lair* is his first project.

"I applied to film school in my second year

of college only to get denied by CalArts, but accepted at the Academy of Art in San Francisco. Unfortunately I didn't get to the west coast to continue my college education and instead found myself working for a printing company," he explained. "That was almost 15 years ago and I regret not making the move."

"Last May I decided to look up the Academy of Art once again and actually visited the campus. I was enthralled by all the creative types wandering. On the plane ride home I was convinced I would be attending film classes there in the fall semester.

"As time went on I started thinking about what I would learn there and at what cost. If I were to start and finish film school there it would cost me in the neighborhood of \$200,000. After realizing this I quickly

focused my attention on the possibility of producing a film for around the same cost."

Touhey's passion for filmmaking is rivaled only by his passion for video games.

"Ever since I saw an arcade I was hooked," he said. "It was truly sensory overload and I loved every minute of it. I spent every quarter I had on dozens of games like *Pac-Man*, *Paperboy*, *Galaga*, and of course *Dragon's Lair*. That was only the start of my obsession of video games."

As Touhey searched for a subject for his film, it was only a matter of time before two of his biggest obsessions collided.

"I went through dozens of ideas until one day it hit me like a bolt of lightning. I quickly Googled 'dragon's lair documentary' and discovered that there had not been a feature-



length documentary made about my favorite video game of all time. I knew then what had to be done.”

Touhey’s company, Sleepyeyed Films, is a creative agency that provides a variety of services from writing to DVD and web video production to editing. *Inside the Dragon’s Lair* is the first full-length feature—and getting it produced was a huge and sometimes daunting task. Touhey explained the steps involved in tackling a documentary film.

The first step is pre-production—researching the game and making initial contact with the game’s creators and other people who are associated with *Dragon’s Lair*. “The documentary will only be worthwhile if these people are involved,” Touhey explained. Securing their support and initial willingness to be interviewed was an important early step.

After the research and initial contacts are completed, the next step is writing the script.

“Documentary film is tricky to write for because of the unpredictable nature of it,” said Touhey. “I try to write a basic skeleton of the film and break the subject down into groups that I know will be covered. This gives me a foundation to build the story upon. Once I’m satisfied with the story structure, I write in visually appealing elements for each section or group, I also write voice over dialogue to accompany the visuals. I look for any kind of stock footage, photographs, news articles or reports that cover my subject and help support the film. I mentally storyboard the entire film in this way.”

After the film is planned out, key personnel are hired and interviews are scheduled. One of the most important members of the team on this production is Justin Maine, a college friend of Touhey’s who co-directed the 2009 documentary *So Right, So Smart*.

With the foundation firmly in place, production begins—traveling, shooting interviews, and logging footage. This is followed by post-production, where the film is edited and scored, and any CG elements are added.

The final step is marketing and distribution. For an independent film, this is one of the toughest and most important phases of the project.

“Independent film has come a long way thanks to the power and scope of the internet, but choosing the correct way to market, promote and sell your film is still a complex and often times confusing ordeal,” said Touhey. “Some projects are given distribution deals based on the track record of the producer or director involved, even before there’s a full script in place. Many independent films are produced first and

then submitted to film festivals in hopes of attracting potential distributors. There are also films that get ‘pitched’ to studios in hopes that they will be picked up and given a deal. Some companies will self-distribute their titles as well. At this moment I’m unsure of what distribution model my project will fit into.”

Of course, before anything can happen, the film has to be funded. In this respect *Inside the Dragon’s Lair* has, up to this point, been a truly independent project.

“Thus far the film is entirely self-funded,” Touhey said. “I am applying for grants and I’m also collecting donations online. Independent film tends to stray away from the normal Hollywood business model. In Hollywood the budget for the film is provided all at once, but in my case, and many others, the funding comes in gradually and the entire production budget is divided into goals. Goal #1 may be \$10,000 for a new camera, goal #2 could be \$5000 for travel and related expenses to start production. These are only hypothetical examples, but it can illustrate how fundraising in small bursts is common among independents and much easier to acquire than larger sums. The downfall to this style of fundraising is the fact that it can be quite time consuming to collect all monies needed to finish the production, which is why many independent films can take years to finish.”

Licensing is also an issue when a film deals with copyrighted material. In this case, Touhey needed to secure permission to use footage, sound, and music from the game. He has been in touch with the *Dragon’s Lair* team to secure the licensing agreement.

Besides the fact that *Dragon’s Lair* is one of his personal favorite games, Touhey chose it as the subject for his film for a variety of reasons.

“*Dragon’s Lair* is a completely unique and intriguing game that has many different facets,” he explained. “From the artistic standpoint of the animation to the laserdisc technology to the musical score, no one can deny the vast differences between *Dragon’s Lair* and other games produced then. It’s not just a video game, it’s an exceptional interactive film and deserves to be recognized as such. The history of this game should be preserved.”

To this end, the film will not stray far from the topic of *Dragon’s Lair* itself. Other RDI games like *Space Ace* and *Dragon’s Lair II* and the laserdisc developed by other companies do not play a big part in the documentary.

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the general technology behind laserdisc arcade games to give a better understanding of how *Dragon’s Lair* works,” said Touhey. “*Dragon’s Lair II* and *Space Ace* will also be mentioned, but not heavily discussed. Other companies’ games such as *Cliff Hanger* and *Cobra Command* will only be mentioned, but not discussed. Explaining the rise and fall of laserdisc games would serve little purpose in this film, therefore it will not be covered.”

Even though the documentary sticks close to its main subject matter, there’s still plenty to cover. Like a handful of other classic games that are considered the mainstays of the golden age—*Pac-Man* and *Donkey Kong*, for example—*Dragon’s Lair* has been adapted for play on a huge number of systems over the years, some of the most recent being the DVD and Blu-Ray versions of the game (playable using the remote control) and the upcoming Nintendo DS version (see *The Wayback Machine* in the March, 2008

issue). Touhey says that his film will touch on all of the versions of the game that have been introduced over the years.

“There will be a section of the film dedicated to this topic and discussed thoroughly. The film will attempt to give a summary of some of the similarities and (sometimes extreme) differences between the coin-op version and the home versions.”

Inside the Dragon's Lair also will also go beyond the original production team to gain different perspectives on the game and its impact. In addition to talking to Don Bluth and his team, Touhey has lined up a lot of other interviews and background information.

“I intend to interview many fans of the game, one in particular being Jason Finn. Jason is the number one fan of Dragon's Lair and has the largest collection of Dragon's Lair arcade games and merchandise. Other fans will be interviewed as well to discuss their collections and their love of the game.

“Overall gameplay will be discussed as well as the premise of the game. Other points of interest to be noted will be the mirror imaging of scenes, the scene order and how it works, the names of each scene, the deaths, deleted scenes, the highest possible score and other game related facts and trivia.”

After this project is completed, Touhey plans to continue making films. Although he likes documentaries, he wants to branch out into fiction films as well. He also plans to continue playing games, and wants to eventu-



ally start expanding his coin-op collection.

“I just started my collection a number of months ago,” he said. “I only own a *Gyruss* cab. It's not even a dedicated cab either, but I'm not really a super collector. Unfortunately, due to space restrictions and expense, I can't really expand my coin-op game collection quite yet. The dream would be to build my own arcade with all the classics in dedicated original cabs plus a skee-ball machine. Gotta have the skee-ball.”

At the moment, however, *Inside the Dragon's Lair* is first and foremost in his mind—and there's still a long way to go.

“So far I'm only in the preproduction stage of the film,” Touhey said. “Everything has been researched to death, and I feel I know much more than the average fan of Dragon's Lair. I just need to fundraise to get myself into actual production.”

If all goes well, Touhey plans to release the

film in August, 2011. He would like to do a festival release, followed by a possible theatrical release and a DVD. The final release plans depend on the distribution model, and Touhey admits that the date is simply a target he's shooting for at this point.

“There are too many factors to mention that will affect the release date,” he admits.

Video game history is something that I firmly believe needs to be documented for posterity, and projects like this one are a step toward preserving the roots of the industry and legitimizing it as an entertainment and art form. Hopefully Touhey's plans will come to fruition, and we can all look forward to following him *Inside the Dragon's Lair* in the near future. **GR**

To keep track of Marty's progress on the film, visit the Sleepyeyed Films web site at www.sleepyeyedfilms.com.

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