The advent of the Apple II in the late '70's gave designers the freedom to work on dedicated machines where anyone could tell us that gaming was forbidden. Apple Trek, Wumpus, Eliza, Adventure, Rogue and Zork all came from mainframe games that made the transition to micros. It should be noted that only in the case of Zork did the designers have the foresight to maintain control of their brainchild and successfully exploit it creatively and commercially.

Not all of us were so insightful. In the mid-seventies I had a fully-functioning fantasy role-playing game on the PDP-10, with both ranged and melee combat, lines of sight, auto-mapping and NPCs with discrete AI. When I bought my Apple, I went back to all my old designs to pick the most promising one to convert ... and ignored my FRP.
Over The River
(Continued from page 18)

each other and whomever we could talk to in local stores. It was not a good way to keep a finger on the pulse of the market.

Senior executives made periodic forays to check on our progress, wandering from cubicle to cubicle to look at games. Some were pleasant and made reasonable comments. Others were petty and dictatorial ("That background ought to be blue. Change it."). In the end the dictator types had less impact than the others, since they never played the games anyway and thus, had no idea whether their orders had been carried out. Nevertheless, I spent a great deal of time talking my best designers out of quitting after being the targets of such visits.

The cartridge era had four distinct periods, each with its implications for game designers. The first period, from 1978-1981, was the time of the Obvious Design of the Obvious Product. The proper route for a design was a straight one: show the action, tally the score. Sports games were the biggest sellers, largely because buyers knew what they were getting before they opened the package.

Game designers of the time worked for big companies (Atari, Mattel), drew average programmer salaries (but not royalties), and didn't have their names on the products. Management regarded their programming skills as the source of their value and game design was often snorted at as an illusory talent: "Anybody coulda made that baseball game, but I was the one who said we oughta do it."

The second era, which ran from 1981-82, centered on the conversion of the latest coin-op hits to the home machines. The speed of development now became absolutely critical, so a game would be ready for the home while it was still hot in the arcades.

The most visible symptom of that rush was the VCS version of Pac-Man, a cartridge awaited with such passion and rushed to market so hurriedly that over 1,000,000 copies were sold in the first few months of its life. Unfortunately, the game was released before its time and featured ghosts and a Pac Man that flickered irritatingly and game play that didn't feel balanced. The game's sales ground to a halt as its bad reputation spread by word of mouth, and Atari had to absorb huge losses on returns. Score one for quality.

Ironically, it was during the third era, a brief time in 1982-83, that game designers finally began to get some of their just rewards. There is a story (perhaps apocryphal) that Pac-Man was finished at all only because of a special mid-project "arrangement" for programmer royalties. The success of Activision after being founded by four former Atari game designers (including Alan Miller and Bob Whitehead, who later left to found Accolade) led Atari, Mattel and Coleco to take a second look at how they handled their creative staffs.

Royalties of the time were in most cases minuscule, but they nonetheless began being paid. Names of designers began to appear in small print on the backs of packages and in manuals. In fact, the companies began working overtime to recruit the best ones away from their competitors.

Nevertheless, before the industry could really mature, new voices sounded the coming in 1983-84 of the fourth era—and the cartridge's death knoll. Dazzled by the success of Atari, Mattel, Coleco and Activision, hordes of initiators jumped into the market. Quaker Oats even founded a video game subsidiary! In late 1982, the number of cartridges manufactured by all these companies far outstripped the demand. Many of the games were absolutely awful, but retailers, riding a 3-year sales burst, kept ordering everything anyway.

Christmas, 1982 was a disappointment and by early 1983, the game-playing public had made the choices which the manufacturers had refused to make. Many of the games still sat on store shelves. Returns started rolling back into the publishers. Several companies went under rapidly: Games by Apollo, Fox Videogames, U.S. Games and others.

Further, once they were bankrupt, they could no longer take returns from the stores. Retailers cut their losses by cutting their prices and the $4.95 specials we still see today appeared in a marketplace where normal prices had averaged $35. Surviving publishers with large inventories started selling better games at bargain prices to cut their losses. The $35 carts looked overpriced by comparison, and even the best games' sales slowed to a crawl as the $5 specials swallowed all remaining demand. More bankruptcies followed, and Atari, Mattel and Coleco disbanded their game design staffs.

The first Cartridge Wars were over.

(I'm sure you've noticed that I've made no reference to the Nintendo craze that has repeated the Atari and Mattel Phenomenon of 8 years ago. That's because for American game designers the Nintendo is a non-event: virtually all the work to date has been done in Japan. Only the future will tell if the design process ever crosses the Pacific as efficiently as the container ships and the letters of credit now do.)

How Deep are the Woods?

While the big companies publishing Coin-Op Conversions and sports games were dominating the cartridge world, small companies like Sirius, Broderbund, Infocom, Automated Simulations, SSI, On-Line Systems and others were quietly building the home computer game market.

Instead of large in-house staffs, these companies usually combined a few game designers who were employees (often the founders themselves) with a group of external programmers. These independent designers had the same relationship with the game companies that book authors have with traditional publishers: they submitted their games for consideration, the publisher chose the good ones, and the authors were paid a royalty.

Authors' names appeared prominently on these game packages long before the practice infiltrated the cartridge world. Names of that early era like Bill Budge (Rasier Blaster), Dan Bunte (Computer Quarterback), Chris Crawford (Eastern Front 1941), Jon Freeman (Temple of Apshai), Dan Gorlin (Choplifter) and Doug Smith (Lode Runner) became familiar to gamers and were associated with quality products. Many of those same designers continue as leaders of our industry today.

From 1978-82 most of the notoriety outside the computer game world went to the cartridge games. Yet, today's industry is directly based on the structure that was evolving in the disk-based world at the same time, the world which Computer Gaming World chose to cover when it first appeared in 1981.

The small publishers succeeded where Atari, Mattel and Coleco had failed, and a key element in that success was, and is, their view of "Computer Game Designers" as special individuals with unique talents who are worthy of all our respect. I can think of no more appropriate conclusion to reach in an article to honor the fiftieth issue of Computer Gaming World.