

ORAL HISTORY OF VIDEO GAMES 2015

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**DOCUMENTARY PROJECT: THE ORAL HISTORY OF VIDEO GAMES**

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## **Abstract**

This IQP was done to add to the ongoing WPI Oral History of Videogames project, which is added to each year with new interviews. We interviewed three individuals: Jon Palace, a former editor at Infocom, Jen Lesser, an artist who worked with both Harmonix and id Software, and R.A. Salvatore, an acclaimed fantasy author who has worked on multiple video games. We edited each interview into cohesive segments and uploaded these to the Alpheus website (<http://alpheus.wpi.edu/imgd/oral-history/index.html>). We also made the unedited version of each interview available for download.

## **Acknowledgements**

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**Jon Palace**

**RA Salvatore**

Interviewees

**Dean O'Donnell**

Project advisor and instructor

**Michael Voorhis**

Provided access to Oral Histories webpage

**WPI Academic Media and Game Development Program**

Allowed use of camera and audio equipment

**WPI Interactive Media and Game Development Program**

Allowed access to lighting kits and also other help

We greatly appreciate the help all of these individuals and organization provided in completing our project and acknowledge their contributions as significant.

## **Authorship Page**

Jacob Hawes, John Guerra, and Charles Wentzell all contributed to the project and each had responsibilities individually and as a group to its completion. The work of the project was split equally so that each person was responsible for one interviewee. Each person researched potential subjects, contacted individuals, researched their backgrounds, and edited the final interviews.

Jacob Hawes was responsible for researching Jon Palace as well as editing that interview. He also served to be something of a resident technology expert and made sure the audio and lighting of interviews was proper and that camera equipment was working. He also converted the final interview segments into the proper format for posting.

John Guerra was responsible for researching Jen Lesser as well as editing those segments. Additionally he was responsible for maintenance of the website, reformatting its contents, and uploading the final edited segments. He also became a leader for the group and coordinated group meetings.

Charles Wentzell was responsible for contacting and researching RA Salvatore as well as editing those segments. He also helped coordinate group meetings, and provided transport to and from the interviews. Additionally he did the primary editing and revising of the main paper and coordinated the writing of the paper segments.

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## **Literature Review**

In order to do this project, we used a variety of sources both for information and for technique. We watched various documentary projects in order to best grasp how to interview our subjects, and we consulted the papers of previous year's projects for insight in what and what not to do. The following is a short review of each of our main sources.

### **Oral History Project: A History of the Video Game Industry (Bruzzese, Baicker-McKee, 2011)**

We browsed all of the previous year's projects but primarily drew from the 2011 and 2013 project papers for insight. From the 2011 paper, we were able to draw ideas for the structure of the paper as well as basic information on editing.

### **The Oral History of Video Games (DelPrete, Graedier, 2013)**

From the 2013 paper, we were better able to receive insight into the two camera set-up as well as information about the structure of the paper. Much of this paper is based on how the 2013 project paper was formatted, with some updates.

### **Homer and the Oral Tradition (Edwards, 1986)**

This resource talked about the role of oral tradition through history was valuable in educating us of the background of oral history. Sections of this resource were very useful in this manner and could be referred to by future projects looking for insight on the topic of oral histories.

**GDC: Rebirth & Risk in Kingdoms of Amalur: Reckoning (Geddes, 2011)**

This article was primarily useful as a reference on the game *Kingdoms of Amalur: Reckoning* as well the involvement of R.A. Salvatore in it. Much like many of the other informative articles this was primarily useful for background information.

**Errol Morris' First Person (Morris, 2015)**

We watched select episodes of Errol Morris' First Person, a series of filmed interviews done by Errol Morris using his "Interrotron". This resource was useful in getting a grasp on one manner of interviews and should be viewed by future iterations of this project.

**BioShock Studio Irrational Games Closing Its Doors (Statt, 2014)**

This article was used to formulate questions for Ken Levine during the time when he was still a potential interviewee. Future project teams that wish to have him be a interview candidate should use this resource.

**Quake III Arena Credits (Quake 3, 1999)**

The credits for Quake 3. Used as a reference for R.A. Salvatore's involvement.

**StoryCorps Story: "I learned to fight with a knife long before I learned how to ride a bicycle." (Reyes, Unknown)**

StoryCorps is an oral history project that should be referenced by future teams. The segments are short recorded conversations and serve as good example of the kind of dialogue teams will want to capture. This particular one was about a former migrant worker and was useful in demonstrating the value of oral history in capturing the opinions of underrepresented peoples.

**BBS: The Documentary (Scott, 2005)**

One of the two Jason Scott documentary projects we watched to gather information on documentary techniques, it concerns the use of the Bulletin Board System of computer connectivity. A valuable resource if just for insight in how to get interviews of individuals in their own space.

**Get Lamp (Scott, 2010)**

The second of two Jason Scott documentaries, specifically detailing the rise of interactive fiction games, especially those of Infocom. Valuable from both a cinematography standpoint and for giving an example of how to do “video game” oral history interviews. We recommend future teams use this.

**Making Sense of Oral History (Shopes, 2012)**

A very good analysis of the value of oral history. This article should be read towards the beginning of the project in order to emphasize how the project team should view their work.

**StoryCorps Story: “My American soldier became my Iraqi brother” (Braun, Unknown)**

Another StoryCorps interview, this details the friendship of a translator and a soldier. This was excellent at showing the ability of an oral history to provide insight and alternate perspectives on world events.

**Importance of the Oral Tradition (White, 1998)**

Another useful source concerning the history of oral history and its importance. Good for examining the value of oral history projects.



## **Introduction**

### **The Oral History Project**

Oral tradition has long been part of how humanity has passed knowledge from generation to the next. Jokes, legends, folktales, and even simple informative stories have been used before and alongside written history as a way of keeping traditions and knowledge available through the years. In the absence of widely available literature, spoken word became the primary method of bringing information to those who wanted it. Even as print became more widely used, oral tradition was used to pass knowledge among largely illiterate populations. In Ancient Greece Homer's *Odyssey* and *Iliad* began as bardic performances, and some suggest Homer may even have been illiterate himself as his writing seemed intended to be heard and not read (Edwards, 1986). Even the Gospels of the Christian *Bible* emerged from oral tradition before being written down. Early followers of Christianity used oral tradition to pass on the stories of Christ's disciples and their teachings, allowing folklore to help them develop as a community (White, 1998). Much of humanity's history was passed as tales and legends told from performer to performer or disseminated to all those who would listen.

### **The Modern Oral History**

The modern oral history is very different than simple oral tradition or folklore, instead it serves as part of a cultural archive. Modern oral history uses audio records, videos, as well as transcripts of interviews in order to archive information about a person, group, event, time period, etc. These records are then catalogued and made available in order to offer insight into the topic. The modern oral history goes beyond passing information from one generation to the

next as instead it serves to anchor the subject(s)'s experiences in a manner that can be accessed by anyone who wishes to learn more on the matter. Their words, as spoken, are preserved as accessible cultural artifacts, as opposed to oral tradition which passed information through retelling, and relied on the memory of each new listener away from the event as if in some generational game of telephone.

Many place the beginning of the modern oral history as recently as the 1940's, with the work of Allan Nevins of Columbia University (Shopes, 2012). Nevins discovered while working on a historical project concerning President Grover Cleveland that the change in technology had left fewer of the physical artifacts: notes, letters and other written records, that historians had relied on for primary source information. In order to supplement the information they did provide, he decided to add recorded interviews. In this manner he further fleshed out the historical perspective of the topic, and birthed the concept for the modern oral history.

### **The Differences of an Oral History**

Oral histories are different from written histories or even more conventional documentary projects for many reasons. To start, they are not typically attempting to achieve objective non-biased reporting of events. On the contrary they strive to be a subjective view on history by capturing the emotional, point of view narratives. This methodology creates a different reference point for historical events, as it allows insight into the minds of those who actually have experienced critical events in history rather than a detached third person viewpoint. For example, while many documentary films will use sound or video clips from the event in question or from related individuals, an oral history does not make use of these as they lack the dialogue that interviews provide. There is a very different perspective that the oral history interview

provides as it allows a much more narrative approach to archiving events. Additionally, by getting a wide array of narratives, one can form a very different view on a subject when compared to a single focus. By getting different subjective accounts, a more dynamic and complete narrative can be formed.

Oral histories also can grant voices to those whose input might be missed in the chaos of chronicling history. Many groups who are disenfranchised, or whose views and experiences might simply not be on the scale required for traditional documentary projects are given a chance to convey their stories and preserve them for posterity. For example in a StoryCorps interview, Stormy Reyes describes what it was like growing up as a migrant worker. She speaks about receiving books from a Bookmobile, and how that changed her life (Reyes, Unknown). The migrant population is largely underrepresented in media and is history as a whole as they rarely have access to public education and other services of self-advancement. As such the general population does not have any great insight into their struggles. By recording her experiences, Reyes brings her voice to the subject and allows a window into her world. This can often be the case, and the oral history allows disenfranchised groups to have an otherwise unavailable role in the archiving of history.

Finally, oral histories have a personal connection that detached, objective documentaries cannot achieve. In our world of technology, it is easy to get news, so easy that it almost seems to be an overload. It is very simple to learn about the big picture, the headlines, and the “newsworthy” information. It is harder, however, to find any real connection to the abstraction of an event covered by the news. For both current and past events it is difficult to truly connect to anything going on in the world that doesn’t directly impact you. Take for example the Iraq War. While it is easy to find facts and statistics about the conflict, it is very hard to find anything

that humanizes the people in that part of the world or forces one to feel connected. This is where the oral history can be very powerful. Sergeant Paul Braun served in Iraq and became so close to his Iraqi translator Philip (a nickname) that he sponsored his visa and is now working to help him bring his family from Iraq to the US (Braun, Unknown). Their bond as brothers is a story that allows insight into the conflict in the Middle East in a way that objective documentation cannot. Listening to them, you learn few facts about the war in Iraq. You don't learn death counts or information on specific battles or even any great political information. You do learn that Iraqi translators are shot for working with US soldier. You learn that two men found brotherhood in the middle of a warzone, and you learn that one has to return to bring his family out. The listener is treated to a unique and powerful piece of the Iraq War that would never be a headline in traditional documentaries and is richer for it. Oral histories have the opportunity to connect so much more personally than objective media can, and provide a unique and interesting view on history.

## Finding Subjects

This was the hardest part of the IQP, by far. Our focus was on people who are no longer in the games industry, but most of the people who were in the industry early on lived in California. Furthermore, finding people from very long ago- before games creators were well credited or documented- is extremely difficult. Factor in all of the people who are uninterested, have no public contact information, or have moved far away, and you have a very difficult search. (One of the people we tried to contact turned out to have died several years prior.) Ultimately, whether or not subjects agreed to be interviewed was entirely out of our hands after our initial contact with them. Note to future iterations of this project: start this as early as possible. Start it over the summer, before A term. Things are going to go wrong.

The first person to agree to an interview was Ken Levine, head of Irrational Games and creator of the universally acclaimed *Bioshock* franchise. This connection was through an acquaintance who had an internship with oneZero Financial, a company made up almost entirely of ex-Irrational employees. Though they didn't respond to us at first, they ended up forwarding our email all the way to Levine. Levine still works in the industry, but had done so for long enough that we could just focus our questions on his past. This almost worked out, but extenuating circumstances made an interview never happen.

Eventually, though, three leads worked out. The first was R. A. Salvatore, a well-known fantasy author best known for *The DemonWars Saga*. While Salvatore's focus isn't in video games, he has worked in the industry a few times, most recently at the now-defunct 38 Studios. Salvatore's only clear public contact info was an old AOL email address, but we were able to find him on Facebook and send a message to his inbox. Future projects should note that

Facebook, by default, filters messages to people you aren't connected with- for them to actually see the message, you have to pay a \$1 fee to prove you're not a spammer. Every single person we contacted via Facebook got back to us very quickly, so we would strongly recommend future projects just pay the dollar.

The second lead was Jon Palace. Though officially an editor at Infocom, he additionally acted as a producer of sorts. He dealt with various administrative tasks while also managing the implementers, though there was no official producer role established in the game industry at the time. WPI's own Prof. Brian Moriarty worked with him at Infocom, and through this connection we were able to contact Palace first through Facebook, then additionally through email.

The third and final lead was Jennifer Hrabota Lesser, an illustrator and 3D artist who worked at Looking Glass Studios with Levine. Lesser worked on Thief, Thief 2, and System Shock 2 during her time at Looking Glass, and went on to work at Harmonix as a character designer for the Guitar Hero games. She currently co-owns the board game company Wild Power with her husband Ryan, where she works as an artist on their newest game, High Heavens.

## Subjects Found

### Ken Levine

While Ken Levine was ultimately unable to be interviewed due to a busy schedule, we were in regular contact with him for four months trying to arrange a meeting. In the process of setting this up, we spent quite a bit of time researching him- his prior work history, his games, and the recent closing of his company, Irrational Games. It would be a waste to throw all that research out, and it may be useful to future groups; as such, we chose to include him in this section.

Ken Levine, born in 1966 in New York, went to Vassar College to study drama. Though he went to Los Angeles to pursue a film career- and wrote two screenplays in the process- he ended up being hired by Looking Glass Studios in 1995 as a writer for their game *Thief: The Dark Project*. Levine would go on to form Irrational Games with Jonathan Chey and Robert Fermier, two coworkers from Looking Glass, and make *System Shock 2*, a sequel to Looking Glass's *System Shock*. Irrational continued to make, among other games, the critically acclaimed *Bioshock* series. Though the studio shut down in early 2014, Levine and a small handful of other employees were able to stay on as a new, currently-unnamed studio under 2K Games.

Unfortunately, the weather this winter was horrible. Boston received over 110 inches of snowfall, its highest total ever. This led to multiple cancellations of interviews, and by the time the snow let up, Levine's new studio was engulfed in the process of moving to a smaller office space. Levine ended up unable to schedule a time before the move would end in June, so we had to move on to new subjects.

**Jennifer Hrabota Lesser**

Jennifer Lesser

Jennifer Hrabota Lesser is a talented illustrator, character designer, and 3D artist. She currently lives in Providence, Rhode Island, where she co-runs the board game company High Heavens with her husband, Ryan Lesser. While her focus is usually on 2D illustration, she worked as a 3D artist for most of the time we interviewed her about.

Lesser got into the games industry with a company called AVX in 1994, making an educational game, *The Nile*. There, she worked as an illustrator, drawing and scanning her work in to animate it in After Effects. She then worked at Learningways from 1997 to 1998, again making educational games.

Lesser went on to work at Looking Glass Studios, where she worked on *Flight*, *Thief*, *Thief 2*, and *System Shock 2*. Many of these projects were with Ken Levine. She started in the



audio visual department, where she mostly worked on 2D cutscenes and web design. She moved on to work as a 3D artist on the later games, mainly *Thief 2*.

Lesser would later work at quite a few other jobs across the games industry. From 2000 to 2002, she worked at Hasbro's "Fantasy Factory", helping design video game versions of their other IPs. Lesser taught 3D modeling at her alma mater, the Rhode Island School of Design, for a year in 2003. Her most recent job in the industry was at Harmonix, from 2002 to 2005, where she was a concept artist and character designer.

### **Robert (R.A.) Salvatore**



R.A. Salvatore

One of the individuals we were fortunate enough to interview was R.A. Salvatore, a New York Times bestselling author and one of the most prominent figures in fantasy writing of the last twenty-five years. Salvatore, a Massachusetts native, was born in 1959 and is an alumnus of Fitchburg State College in Fitchburg, Massachusetts from which he holds both a Bachelor of Sciences in Communications and a Bachelor of Arts in English. He has been a major part of the

fantasy genre since 1988 when he published the *Crystal Shard*, the first book in the Icewind Dale Trilogy and part of the officially TSR licensed Dungeons and Dragons Forgotten Realms lore. Salvatore continued to write books in the Forgotten Realms setting featuring his character Drizzt Do'Urden through the purchase of TSR and the Dungeons and Dragons brand by Wizards of the Coast and continues to work with the setting to this day. Most recently his book *Vengeance of the Iron Dwarf* released on March 3, 2015. Through his novels, Salvatore has shaped the entirety of the lore of the Forgotten Realms and has been a major influence in the Dungeons and Dragons role playing system.

In one sense, Salvatore's work in the Forgotten Realms setting has given him a very tangential relationship with the video games industry. Many games have drawn from his work, either directly or indirectly, including the *Baldur's Gate* series produced by Bioware which feature his characters Drizzt Do'Urden and Bruenor Battlehammer along with other universe canon features of Salvatore's writings. (*Baldur's Gate*, 1998) Many other games that have drawn from Dungeons and Dragons since the start of Salvatore's involvement have also drawn from his work.

Salvatore has also had a more direct role in the video games industry, having worked on *Forgotten Realms: Demon Stone*, *Quake 3: Arena*, and *Kingdoms of Amalur: Reckoning*. Salvatore was lead writer and created the script for Stormfront Studio's game *Forgotten Realms: Demon Stone*, which was produced by Atari. He wrote many of the bot chat lines for *Quake 3: Arena*. (*Quake 3*, 1999)

Salvatore was part of the 38 Studios project *Kingdoms of Amalur: Reckoning* where he was in charge of writing and creative design. 38 studios had acquired the game well into its development cycle when they absorbed Big Huge Games, and as such much of the plot of the

game had already been constructed by the time Salvatore was attached to the project. He was brought in primarily to create a 10,000 year world lore which was to be used in a planned MMORPG code named “Copernicus” that was scrapped when 38 Studios went under. This MMO was the main project of 38 studios and Reckoning had been meant as a lead in to this game. His role in the development consisted of the world building lore along with storyline tweaks to the game in order to fit with that overarching picture. (Geddes, 2011)

### **Jon Palace**



Jon Palace

Originally an editor at McGraw Hill for textbooks and such in New York City, Palace began looking for alternative positions anywhere but NYC. He eventually stumbled on an ad in *Boston Globe Magazine* asking for an editor position at a company called Infocom. Though he

didn't really have much experience at all in the company or the rising interactive fiction scene, he took the job.

Though professionally he was known as an editor at Infocom, he ultimately took on the role of a producer. The idea of a producer in the video game industry wasn't yet established, though it involves managing different people and making sure everyone works well together to output the best possible product. Palace took care of a lot of the administrative tasks so that the other employees (implementers, or "imps" at the time) could focus solely on the creative aspect of the titles they produced, though he was very much involved with them.

Even during the company's decline, acquisition by Activision, and eventual disbandment in 1989, Palace was still employed at Infocom. He has since worked in various editing or producing roles in a number of different companies, though none directly involved in game development. He currently works as a director at the Copyright Clearance Center.

## Getting Ready

During our first term, we were challenged with producing short interviews of ourselves. This was not only to familiarize us with the equipment and process, but also to experience the interviews from both perspectives.

The very first thing we did was watch the previous years' documentaries. This gave us a better idea of what we were working toward- camera techniques, subject material, lighting, etc. Some things had been established previously- like title card style and format- that we wouldn't be able to change, but we also found some flaws we could polish out. Some video edits, for example, felt out of place and unprofessional, and we agreed it was important to come across as a more unified whole.

When we started the Oral History Project, we had no experience making documentaries. We'd each seen plenty of them, but we'd never focused on how the documentary itself was made, just on the content it was documenting.

For the first few weeks, our main job was to watch documentaries and really dig deep into how they were made. *BBS: The Documentary*, *Get Lamp*, and episodes of *First Person*. We focused on all the things you don't notice normally in a documentary- the setting, the transitions, how audio is spliced together.

The setting, in particular, was especially important. Our goal when filming was to have the subject in a comfortable place, not a recording studio. Figuring out where to shoot was an art that we had some difficulty getting the hang of.

## Recording

We used a fair amount of equipment from the school, detailed below:

- A Canon HDV Camcorder - XHA1 video camera
- Camera case (2 rechargeable batteries, charging station, manual)
- External card reader to capture footage from camera
- Tripod camera stand
- 2 point lighting kit (2 fluorescent lights with stands and diffusion umbrellas)
- 2 clip on lavalier microphones

Other equipment was also available, such as a number of DSLR cameras and a shotgun microphone complete with a boom stand, blimp, and “dead cat” windscreen. We didn’t use any of these for our initial tests.

Setting up the equipment was fairly straightforward. A couple members had already worked with similar equipment in the past, and thus had experience setting up the camera, lighting, and audio.

The camera was mounted on the tripod, then leveled to get a straight shot. Not having many places available for us to shoot, we chose the biggest apartment our team had access to in order to get the maximum amount of separation between the subject and the background. This gives the shot depth, avoiding the illusion of having the subject plastered against the wall behind them. We sat the subject on the couch in the middle of the room, framing the stairs behind them to add a little more visual interest than the blank brick wall on the other side.

We set up a simple two point lighting setup around our subject with our lighting kit. A typical interview lighting setup uses three lights: a key light, the main light that illuminates the front of the subject; a fill light, a softer light pushed off center to fill in any shadows formed by

the key light; and a backlight, which forms a slight halo around the subject, helping to separate them from the background. We used our lights as a key and fill, using the natural light from the window of the apartment as a makeshift backlight. The diffusion umbrellas helped give a softer, more natural look to the shadows than if we hadn't used them.

For audio, we only used a lav microphone and the onboard camera mic for backup. The lav wasn't wireless, but fortunately it came with an extremely long XLR cable. We had no difficulty running it from the subject to the input on the camera (though we had to be careful not to trip over the coil of wire on the floor). The lav mic has to be routed under the subject's shirt and clipped to the collar in order to stay hidden; letting the cable hang in front of the shirt not only looks unprofessional and distracting, but can also be a hassle if the subject moves around.

Because the lav mic is so close to the subject's face, it captures exceptionally better audio than the camera's onboard mic. However, the lav mic is very sensitive to subtle movements of the shirt, so we had to stay aware of how much the subject would move during the interview. We still ensured the onboard mic was picking up a decent signal for backup purposes.

Unfortunately, several issues popped up that weren't as straightforward. We didn't have any tapes, and the SD card slot on the camera didn't seem to record, so the external card reader was our only form of capturing footage. We had a bit of trouble ensuring that it was in fact recording the video fed to it. It took around fifteen minutes to tinker around with it and flip through its manual to get a feel for how it worked.

Since the camera isn't recording footage internally, it thinks it's simply idling, and thus auto shuts itself off after a short period of time to save battery. This means that, during an interview, the camera will attempt to shut itself off every 5 minutes. Our improvised solution

was to tap the zoom toggle slightly, thus canceling the auto shutdown. Unfortunately, this led to a subtle zoom change in the middle of our interview footage.

During a second practice interview, we discovered upon setting up the lighting that one of the bulbs emitted a grating buzz, making it impossible to capture clean audio with it powered on. We were forced to use only one light, thus working with bounced light from the environment to try and get even lighting. It didn't look particularly appealing, but it technically worked.

Lesson learned: test all equipment *far before* when you'll actually need to use it. Equipment isn't perfect and things are bound to go awry. If issues do arise during shooting, work them out quickly and cautiously to the best of your ability in order to move forward.

Next was to record the actual interviews. Just for practice purposes, we determined specific topics to talk about with each person, but adlibbed the questions rather than preparing them in advance. We trusted ourselves to ask the right questions to bring the best out of each interview.

We had to be extremely cognizant of our own speech: making sure to talk at a pace that wasn't too fast or too slow, enunciating all words thoroughly and clearly. The conversations may have been a bit awkward at first, but once we got into our respective topics, the flow became more natural. If mistakes were made, we found it best to pause, think of how to structure our thoughts, and start over. This approach can be a bit repetitive, but it makes editing much easier by giving the editor plenty of space and options to work with down the line.

The total running times of our practice footage varied; some were around seven to eight minutes, while the longest one topped out at twenty. Each of us had plenty of footage to work with in the editing phase.



After an hour or so, we wrapped up the interviews and started to shoot a few minor b-roll shots. We all had other work to attend to, so these shots were done hastily and turned out admittedly bland. We had to regroup later in order to gather the materials necessary to shoot better b-roll. With that set, we had all of the footage we needed.



Test Interview One



Test Interview Two

## Editing

After shooting, we were tasked with editing each person's interview down to less than 3 minutes. This brings up the inevitable question: why edit at all? Why not just distribute the raw footage and be done?

The first answer that comes to mind is to make the footage accessible to a wider audience. Not many are willing to sit through hours and hours of unedited footage, as it seems bloated and unrefined. By cutting out unnecessary pauses or conversational tangents, we streamline the experience for the viewer, making it easier to watch and easier to pique their interest.

Editing also allows us to manipulate time. If the person interviewed gave us a few segmented bits of a story, but they were all spread out or out of order, we can rearrange them in linear fashion to make the flow of the story easier to understand. In contrast, we can take a linear story and mix up the order, crafting a more intriguing experience for the audience. For example, we can present the story in the middle, then show the beginning later, leaving the audience trying to figure out the story's context until the very end.

It also helps more technical details, making the flow of the story quicker or easier to follow. If a particular interviewee talks gratingly slow, the footage can be sped up a bit to help them along. Removing vocal quirks, such as "ums" or pauses in the middle of sentences, annoys the listener less and lets them focus on the story being told.

Perhaps one of the most powerful uses of editing is to enhance- or completely change- the mood of the presented material. Even by layering different types of music under an

interview, we can completely change how the viewer perceives it. There are many tools at an editor's disposal: music, sound effects, text and lower thirds, graphics, b-roll, and more. As we learned (quite amusingly), we can take a relatively tame interview and craft a story out of it that never really existed, or change the interviewee's apparent intent.

That being said, we submit both an edited interview and the raw footage at the end of the project: a condensed, edited version that's easier to watch, and the raw footage so anyone can see the full interview.

The school's computers were loaded up with the Adobe Creative Suite, so we used Premiere CC to edit. Not everyone had editing experience before, so we all sat down to work together and walked each other through the interface. Importing the footage was easy enough, if not a bit unnerving how slowly the footage copied off the external card.

Getting the footage to play nicely with Premiere is a bit tricky. There are multiple facets of the video that have to line up with Premiere's project settings: dimensions, frame rate, pixel aspect ratio, etc. Luckily there's a way to match the setting automatically by dragging the footage over the "Create new Sequence" button, which automatically sets up the project with the corresponding settings of the footage you use.

There are many technical things to get used to on the software end, but the core of editing is sifting through all footage and crafting a story out of it; determining how to arrange and display it to best suit the central idea. We started by finding a central arc to focus on, then cutting the raw footage together. Finer editing helps the individual parts flow together, smoothing out any transitions or editing pauses in between speech to ensure it sounds natural. It's very much a subtractive process, refining down a few large chunks of footage into a coherent whole.

At the end of the week, we shared our final results. Some of the results were quite hilarious, but all of us got a solid overall understanding of the process.

### **Final Interview Editing**

After editing down our interview to less than three minutes, we were given our next task: edit them down even further to half. We were a bit baffled, as making the initial edits down to the required time was difficult enough.

This forced us to make decisions about what story we ultimately wanted to tell; we had to sift through and find what footage supported that story or idea, and filter out whatever didn't contribute to this central idea.

Though the time adjustment seemed a bit arbitrary, it's most certainly a concern in any professional situation. People's time is a precious commodity, and it must be respected and kept in mind. As a general rule, the shorter amount of time you can convey your message, the better.

Some of us trimmed down the footage we already had, sticking with the same central idea as we did earlier. Others completely revamped the original idea, twisting it into something more amusing and further from the original intent. Either way, it was still incredibly difficult to halve the running time while still getting our points across.

The results showed, though; the further edited videos were snappier, more interesting to watch as a result. Armed with this experience, we were well prepared to capture actual interviews with industry veterans, and edit them down into something both informative and entertaining.

## The Interviews

The interviews themselves were perhaps the smoothest part of the entire process. After all the difficulty we experienced finding people open to being interviewed, driving out to see them was a significantly more pleasant experience.

The first interview we conducted was with Salvatore. One of our group members was unable to join us that day, as it was happening over spring break. The other two members went out to WPI, took out the camera equipment from the ATC, and drove out to Salvatore's house. Salvatore had actually forgotten the interview was that day, but was still very receptive to us, happily inviting us in, introducing us to his family and pets, and showing us into his office. We set up the camera equipment, took the interview, shot some B-roll, thanked him for his time, and left. The other two interviews went almost exactly the same way.

All three interviewees were incredibly friendly. Palace ordered us pizza, Salvatore gave us copies of his book, and Lesser spent extra time showing us her game room. This was definitely the best part of the entire IQP, and we hope future groups experience similar success.

## **Tips for the Future**

This was already said earlier in the paper, but it bears repeating: if you're taking this project, plan early! Have a list of names ready before A-term starts. Do your search over the summer so you aren't wasting terms doing it. We came dangerously close to failing this project, and it was hugely attributable to timing. If we'd contacted people earlier, we wouldn't have had to deal with the record-breaking snowstorms this winter, and the Levine interview would have worked out. If we'd had a list of people earlier, we'd have known who was responsive and who wasn't before B term even started, which would have let us do our interviews then instead of C and D terms. Your IQP is hugely dependant on outside people helping you out; plan in advance!

Be sure to test the equipment beforehand. Our group found that one of the bulbs in one of the IMGD lighting kits emits a loud buzzing noise, making it virtually worthless for recording a documentary. We had a key to the room the lighting kits were kept in for reasons unrelated to the IQP, so when we realized the problem, one of our group members just walked back to the room and swapped the bulb out for another. If your group doesn't have access to that room- which you likely won't- then access to the lighting kits is at the discretion of whatever professors, staff, or students you know who can let you in. Test everything the night before.

Another example of equipment that didn't behave as expected was the batteries for the cameras. Though our group always made sure to charge the camera batteries before returning them to the ATC, other users were not as polite. Though we usually charged our equipment the night before to be sure, we were only able to rent our equipment an hour before leaving for one interview. When we got there, we found one set of batteries was almost entirely

drained. Luckily, an outlet was close enough that we could just plug the camera in, but you can't assume that will be the case at your interview location.

Future groups should also be sure to put in work orders for their equipment to the ATC as early as possible. Not only do the staff there appreciate it, as it lets them pack all the equipment on their own time and not during busy hours, but other people do rent the equipment. The lav mics, in particular, are not the IMGD program's. Though the ATC owns a number of them, it's still best to avoid leaving an important interview up to chance.

It should be noted that the quality of the IMGD camera equipment was consistently worse than that of the ATC handheld cameras. If, in the future, the ATC offers adapters to let the lav mics and IMGD boom mic hook into the handheld cameras, we strongly encourage groups use them instead. All sorts of problems arose with the IMGD camera that didn't with the handheld ones, in white balancing, graininess, pixel size ratio, or output file type. The newer cameras are simpler, more compatible with other modern technology, lighter, smaller, and overall just easier to use. As a final piece of technical advice, it is advised that future project teams chose to avoid using .flv files for the completed interviews and instead use a more modern, effective file type supported by Adobe. All the current videos use .flv files, and would have to be converted should the website be reworked.

## Conclusion

In the end, this project was only completed through considerable effort and frustration. We faced many issues, especially in contacting potential interviewees and coordinating times for interviews. While this project was not without its share of complications, it stands as having been worth the effort. The project not only was enriching, it also served an important role in documenting parts of videogame history that might otherwise not be recorded. As earlier stated, the role of an oral history is to get multiple subjective views on a complicated topic and use those to paint a more complete picture of the subject matter. As such, the continued work of this project serves to chronicle these more subjective accounts of videogame history as pieces of a larger whole.

The content of this project was also enriching in its content and challenges, as it pushed us to use critical thinking skills and to expand our knowledge base into more varied topics. Before this project the concept of an oral history was less familiar to us, and we were less capable in determining its importance. Additionally we learned editing skills, both for video and for documentation, and were forced to improve ourselves for the completion of the project.

Overall, future teams should be encouraged to continue this work, though the supply of individuals to interview in the New England area is running low. Unfortunately, the quality of computer interviews are not quite as good, and they lose something of a personal touch. As such, future project teams may have to be creative in their pursuit of candidates and perhaps may look to Montreal or other centers of videogame development. It is also possible, and perhaps desirable for a future team to compile the collection of interviews into a cohesive documentary which could be presented at feature length.



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## Appendices

### Appendix A: Potential Interviewees

As a note to future project teams, we will leave any relevant contact information with Professor Dean O'Donnell.

**Ken Levine:** While we were unable to actually interview him due to multiple weather related cancellations, we parted on good terms and he could be an excellent lead for future teams.

**Admiral Jota:** An interactive fiction writer who created the game *Lost Pig*. Never responded to us when we emailed him, but lives in New Hampshire and may be a useful future lead.

**Ken Williams:** Co-founded On-Line Systems with his wife Roberta. Unfortunately he is hard to reach as he spends much of the winter months cruising the Pacific.

**Roberta Williams:** Co-founded On-Line Systems with her husband Ken. Unfortunately she is hard to reach as she spends much of the winter months cruising the Pacific.

**John Tylko:** Co-founder of General Computer Company and one of the creators of Crazy Otto, the original version of Ms. Pacman. Currently he works at R&D for Aurora Flight Sciences in Cambridge Massachusetts. We were unable to find this information before the interviews so he remains a viable interview candidate.

**Douglas Macrae:** Co-founder of General Computer Company and one of the creators of Crazy Otto, the original version of Ms. Pacman. He worked as an advisor at 38 Studios as well. While we were unable to locate his current location, he may be a useful lead for future teams.

**Jesse Johnson:** Worked at Irrational with Ken Levine from 2005 to 2009. Currently he works at OneZero Financial, a finance company he co-founded comprised mostly of ex-Irrational employees. Johnson is a WPI graduate. When asked to be interviewed, he forwarded us to Levine instead.

**Christopher Kline:** Like Johnson, Kline now works at OneZero. He was a technical director at Irrational from 2002 to 2013. We didn't contact him.

**Geoffrey Graves:** Also works at OneZero. He worked as the director of IT at Irrational from 2006 to 2011. We didn't contact him.

**Ian Bond:** Also works at OneZero. He was a programmer at Irrational from 2005 to 2010. We didn't contact him.

**Jane Jensen:** Designed the Gabriel Knight games, a series of 1990s point-and-click adventures. She currently runs a small indie company called Pinkerton Road, which co-developed a 3D remake of the first Gabriel Knight game. We did not contact her.

### **Appendix B: Questions for Salvatore**

These are all the questions we prepared for the interview with R.A. Salvatore. Other questions were asked but not prepared.

1. How did you get started as an author?
2. What was working in the Forgotten Realms ip like?
3. How long did you work with TSR and Wizards?
4. Tell us about the Demon Stone Game with Atari.
5. What was it like to work on your own ip with Demon Wars?
6. How did you begin working with 38 Studios?
7. How was Big Huge Games attached to the project?
8. Would you do it again?
9. How did you become attached to the Quake 3 bot chat lines?
10. How is writing for games different than writing fantasy?
11. What are your thoughts on the direction of the fantasy genre and fantasy video games?

### **Appendix C: Questions for Palace**

These are all the questions we prepared for the interview with Jon Palace.

1. Why did you decide to work for a company who was producing something that you had almost zero knowledge of? How did you prepare?
2. What was the first task you were assigned to do at Infocom?
3. At what point did you realize that your job involved managing people more so than being an editor?
4. What was your involvement with the implementers?
5. Besides the implementers, whom else did you interact with at Infocom?
6. How was editing interactive fiction any different than editing for textbooks or other materials?
7. What was the culture at Infocom like? (I heard there were a lot of parties...)
8. Even though you primarily dealt with administrative tasks, how were you involved in the creative process?
9. What lead up to the Activision buyout? What was the company like during this period?
10. Why'd you stick around even after many others left around the buyout?
11. What was different about managing people at Infocom than in any other field you've worked in?
12. Is there a particular title developed at Infocom that you were attached to in some way?
13. Do you ever see yourself getting back into the game industry, either as a producer or an editor?
14. What was an average day like at Infocom?

15. Was there ever a time when, due to some reason, you had to dramatically shift the focus of a project or completely change it?
16. What was the process for creating a typical Infocom title?
17. Did you ever run into absurdly bad spelling or punctuation mistakes, or discovered large plot holes while editing?
18. Did you ever have your own ideas for a text adventure, whether original or contributing to someone else's work?
19. What was it like when the company finally disbanded in 1989?
20. What do you think of games today as a creative medium compared to how they were 30 years ago?



### **Appendix D: Questions for Lesser**

These are all the questions we prepared for the interview with Jennifer Lesser.

1. Your first job as an animator was animating 2D characters for a company called Learningways. How did you come to work there? What were you animating for?
2. You worked at Looking Glass Studios for 2 years on 3 different games. How'd you come to work there? Which was your favorite to work on? Do you have any particularly memorable moments you'd like to share?
3. You worked as an art director at Hasbro for 2 years. Was that focused more on 2D or 3D? What sorts of projects did you work on there?
4. I understand you're currently predominantly a 2D artist and painter, but you taught 3D modelling and animation for a while at RISD. Do you still work with 3D?
5. Your most recent job in video games was at Harmonix as a character artist. What sorts of characters were you working on? Were they from scratch, or based on real people?
6. How did working in the industry change as you worked in it? Do you think things have changed much since then?