Mechanical Donkeys

***M.U.L.E*—A800, C64, NES, PC**
By John Szczepaniak

M.U.L.E. was one of the greatest games developed before the 1984 crash. Initially released for the Atari 800, it was ported to several systems, including the Commodore 64 and Nintendo Entertainment System. Its simple yet perfectly formed gameplay is still a joy to experience with other players. Despite not pumping out millions of polygons or a licensed soundtrack, it can still hold its own against modern games, at least in terms of raw multiplayer fun. This is both a promise and challenge to the readers of *The Gamer's Quarter:* find two friends, or kidnap some locals, and play at least one simultaneous three-player game—a full twelve rounds. Four players is best, but three will do. Once the basics have been learned, I guarantee you will have some of the best and most intense multiplayer gaming of your life, right up there with *Saturn Bomberman, Super Monkey Ball,* and even *Halo.*

The game at its most basic involves grabbing plots of land, equipping a *M.U.L.E.* (Multiple-Use Labor Element) with one of four industries (food, energy, and two types of mining), and then setting it to work. After some produce has been harvested, you and the other players buy, sell, and generally trade with each other and the store. The goal of course is to have enough produce to ensure the efficient running of your little plots, and also sell enough to eventually become the richest of those playing, and then be crowned the winner at the end of twelve rounds. It works better in practice, and is very easy to learn. The beauty of it comes from the wheeling and dealing that goes on between each player, which is why you need some friends.

Wishing to prove to people the above claims—some will think I'm exaggerating, but I assure you, I am not—I wrote a four-page feature on the development of *M.U.L.E.*, for another magazine. In doing so, I also pulled in a few favours I had with industry insiders I knew in order to get the contact details of the original team. Dan Bunten, the leader behind the group, underwent surgery to change genders and became Dani Bunten. She sadly passed away in 1998 due to lung cancer. There is an excellent memorial found on the website Anticlockwise (*http://www.anticlockwise.com/dani*).

But I did manage to track down Joe Ybarra (formerly a producer at Electonric Arts), Trip Hawkins (EA's founder), and Jim Rushing (who is still with EA). I also got in contact with Ted H. Cashion, who worked on the project. They all very kindly answered many questions and agreed to phone interviews, which I later transcribed.

Sadly, out of more than seven thousand words that I acquired through these interviews, less than a thousand were used in the article. Having read these energetic and emotional stories, I felt guilty at not being able to publish them in their entirety. I also felt that it would be wrong of me to simply lock away the micro cassettes and leave the transcriptions to degrade on my hard drive. So here I present to the readers of *The Gamer's Quarter* the full interviews I conducted, containing the personal views of the people who helped make *M.U.L.E.* what it is.

Not only do they cover the making of *M.U.L.E.*, but they also speak about the early days of Electronic Arts, and of the development atmosphere of the early 1980s. It was truly a different time, with different attitudes; and anyone who is even remotely interested in the history of American videogames should find the following anecdotes to be incredibly interesting. Read them and remember, these are a part of your gaming history.

Joe Ybarra

Having gone to great lengths acquiring his details, I first contacted Joe Ybarra, formerly a producer at EA (one of their very first producers, in fact), and currently "Vice President of Product Development" at Cheyenne Mountain Entertainment. I phoned him at his office, and he kindly spent time answering questions.

TGQ: Can you tell me about your involvement with the development of *M.U.L.E.* and the core team of four?

Ybarra: OK. Well, let's see, how can I explain this? At the time when we built *M.U.L.E.*, it was one of the first projects we started up at Electronic Arts. And at that time, we were still inventing the concept of what a producer does. Up until that point, in the history of our industry there were no producers. So essentially what I was doing, as part of being a producer for any of the teams, but particularly Ozark Softscape, was to essentially ... my party role was liaison between publisher and developer. But I also had to pitch in and do whatever was necessary to help the developer work out whatever issues that came up. Financial, scheduling, procedural, resources, design, whatever. So, essentially what I needed to do was just be involved in the project at a very intimate level.

TGQ: Did you have much creative design input regarding *M.U.L.E.*?

Ybarra: I actually did have quite a bit of design input. In fact, a lot of the issues that we discussed before we even began the design of *M.U.L.E.*, were things that Dan and I spent a fair amount of time, along with Trip, talking through the idea of ... starting from the premise that the only real successful game that was based on money has been *Monopoly.* In that regard, there were a lot of elements of

board games that we wanted to make sure that we incorporated into the design of *M.U.L.E.* And of course at the time when we were building *M.U.L.E.*, we didn't know it was going to be called *M.U.L.E.* In fact we had no idea what this game was going to be like. What we had was a template, with the work that Dan had done between Cartels and Cutthroats, and then another product that he had done, that had an auction system in it that was not dissimilar from *M.U.L.E.* We could look at those two products and ask what do we want to do with a game that was essentially a financial game.

Trip brought into the equation … one of the things he really wanted to embody was some fundamental teaching and training principals. So he made a significant contribution in that area. And then in my area, because of the orientation towards the board gaming world and various different other elements, I contributed things like the additional map screens and the whole concept of how the map would work. We needed to have some kind of a play field that the players engaged in, so they actually have a visual and tactile representation of where they were. That's what Monopoly does for you—you've got the board, the counters; you move around in a big circle, buying houses; and there's a lot of tactile relationship there.

Dan came up with the idea of about how that screen would actually functionally work, and of course it was his work that created the underlying economics system. If you're a player then you're aware of the fact of that, the way that the [unintelligible] in there is done in a very orderly and systemic way. Those were all contributions that Dan made. Otherwise, that was the area that I wanted to make sure got in there. As well as the chance of "community chest" cards. There were random events that came up in that game, and that was another component that we wanted to make sure got embodied in there.

Beyond that, I think a lot of where my contribution came in, in the creative process, was essentially helping really playtest and tune this thing. I probably personally invested about between two hundred and four hundred hours of gameplay on *M.U.L.E.*, just helping make sure the thing played correctly. Between that and actually just taking the builds, providing criticisms where appropriate, and accolades where appropriate, that was kind of my bit.

TGQ: What was some of the reactions to Dan's belief that the future of gaming was multiplayer? Was there any resistance?

Ybarra: Well, there was resistance from the standpoint that at the time—we're talking about the early '80s—there wasn't really any marketplace or vehicle for us to support really core multiplayer play, other than in the consoles themselves. As you'll know, the Atari computer system had the ability to take four joysticks. While the Commodore with some jury-rigging could support four players as well. So within that context, we clearly had no objection whatsoever to supporting multiplayer play. I think the real question became later on in the evolution of both Electronic Arts, and that led eventually to *Modem Wars*. And *Modem Wars* was the type of product, as well as *Robot Rascals,* were we would try and address the concept of multiplayer play by doing so in an environment that was not going to require us to do something like we would see in a modern MMO now. Again, bear in mind, at the time when *Modem Wars* was built, the penetration of modems and connectivity in computers was very low. It was only being done by the hardcore customers. And even the hardcore customers would only do it because they were most likely doing it as part of the work they did. Since it was not something you would expect the customers to have.

Nevertheless, the point is that we always felt that, at some level, games are about interacting with other people. We talked about that, actually, in the original business plan for Electronic Arts, about how we felt that at some level we wanted to create products that would encourage people to interact with one another. This was wonderfully easy to do at the time.

TGQ: Rumour about the sequel in the early '90s, and additions of combat? Can you comment?

Ybarra: No I can't, because all of these events transpired after I left EA. I would only see Dan sporadically, so I never found about the existence of this product until well after it had been cancelled.

TGQ: Did the Wampus come about because of the old computer game Hunt the Wumpus?

Ybarra: It was.

TGQ: Despite the different spellings?

Ybarra: The spelling was different, but the concept was exactly the same.

TGQ: Do you have any personal message or thoughts regarding the game?

Ybarra: Sure! *M.U.L.E.* was a rather interesting product in the portfolio of EA, because in many respects it really exemplified the values that we really wanted the company to be perceived as. From the standpoint that it wasn't a game that was catering to violence, that it was a game that had lots of underlying training and educational value, it was just a heck of a lot of fun, and it was highly accessible. One of our mottos at the beginning of EA was that products needed to be "simple, hot and deep." That was sort of a credo that we had in product development. And *M.U.L.E.* really exemplified all of those elements. Of being simple to play; it was very hot in that it was exciting; and then deep because the more you played it the more you began to realize how much depth there actually was in the simulation. So to that extent, I think *M.U.L.E.*, for many years actually at EA, really did serve as a philosophic model for us.

I think that another thing that was really interesting about *M.U.L.E.* was that *M.U.L.E.* really helped us legitimize our company in the eyes of the people that were very conservative—and in particular, I'm describing the investors and the original capitalization of the company, as well as various other people including other employees and the other developers too. I think the fact that we were publishing a game like *M.U.L.E.* really made the development community feel like EA was an environment that would support the creative processes and would take risks. It allowed us to do things that people had not done before. For many years, that was very much the case with EA. Some of the final products that I got to work on at EA were all very experimental. Products that I think had never been done like that before. In fact, that's the reason why EA Sports even exists now, because of the work we did

on *One on One* and *John Madden Football* particularly, and then *Skate or Die* afterwards, and other products that came out in the late '80s and '90s.

I also want to say that Dan was tremendously respected in the company. More than just respect, I think he had the love of most everybody there as well. His character and the nature of the way he interacted with people, and again the values that he represented, I think we all just felt very special at having that relationship with Dan, and the rest of the team. I really enjoyed my time with Dan. I think one of the more interesting points in my career was, after we completed *Heart of Africa,* it became pretty deeply obvious that the relationship that Dan and I had as producer and developer was coming to a close. Because there was no real growth going on for either one of us. I felt for me personally that working with Dan, although it was really immensely enjoyable, that we had pretty much plumbed the creative process between the two of us. From that point of view, I think he wanted to find out what it was like to work with somebody else and experiment in areas that I had no interest in. So that was sort of a parting of the ways between the two of us.

It kind of reinforces my thinking about how closely in parallel a development team—and the process of creating games—is very much like rock-and-roll bands. In the sense that you've got all these disparate, different instruments and players working together to create a common thing. And that it's extremely difficult to sustain the energy and enthusiasm and excitement for a really long period of time. I guess Dan and I worked together for … what, about four years I guess? Something in that neighbourhood. It was great, we did some really amazing stuff together. But the time had come for the end for us, and then he was, in turn, produced by David who worked with him on *Robot Rascals*.

TGQ: Can I quote you from the tribute site? There are some good anecdotes.

Ybarra: Absolutely. Go for it. By all means, do so.

Another interesting anecdote that … I'll never forget this, because of the impact, starting a new company like EA, building a new product with all these different developers, and then inventing the processes—it was a very funny time. I remember that early spring, after January, February, March … because we started *M.U.L.E.* roughly in the November of '81. Or was it '82? I guess it's '82. And we launched the product, I believe it was May 23 of '83. So the entire development cycle for that product was six months. Right about the mid-point of the product, when we were starting to get first playable, that was when I started my several-hundred-hour journey of testing this game. I can remember many nights I would come home from work and fire up the Atari 800 and sit down with my, at the time, two-year-old daughter on my lap holding the joystick that didn't work, while I was holding the joystick that did work, testing this game. And I'd probably get eight or ten games in at night, and I would do that for two or three or four months actually, trying to work out all the kinks in the product.

By the way, at that time in the history of EA, we had no testers. In fact we had no assistance—we didn't have anything! So producers had to do everything. I tested my own products; I built my own masters; I did all the disk-duplication work; I did all the copy-protection; I did the whole nine yards! If it was associated with getting the product manufactured, the producers did all the work. I remember a lot of nights there staying up until one or two o'clock in the morning playing *M.U.L.E.* and thinking, "Wow, this game is good!" It was a lot of fun. And then thinking to myself, "Gee, I wish the AI would do this." So I took notes and took them along to Dan, and say "If you do these kinds of things at this point in the game, this is what happens." He would take parts of those notes, and a couple of days later I'd get a new build and be back in that main chair back with my daughter on my lap, once again testing this thing and checking to see if it worked. More often than not, it did. That was a really special time.

What I've told people over the years of EA was—it was my personal opinion, and I'm not sure if this is a true statement anymore, but it certainly was at the time—that I thought that *M.U.L.E.* was the most-playtested and best-balanced game that EA would produce for many, many, many years. And that was simply because there were lots of people that really loved that game, and put a lot of love and attention into that thing, and really knew what they were doing. Because of that, we could make really insightful comments about how the AI was working, or how different code elements were working, and so on and so forth, that really made the development process a lot easier for both sides. So I was really proud of that project. But I think I may've mentioned somewhere in that article there, that the best product I did with Dan was the one we would do next, *Seven Cities of Gold*. And of all the projects I worked on at EA, that was my favourite.

TGQ: It certainly showed, all the hard work you put into *M.U.L.E.* Twenty years later people are still playing it.

Ybarra: Yeah! I'm, just shocked about that. [laughing] I don't understand it. Yeah, I just don't get it. Hopefully someday there will be some people grown up now that never saw *M.U.L.E.*, will get to play it.

TGQ: Yes! Hopefully! There'll be a four-page article on it. It'll hopefully get more people interested. If I need any more info, I'll e-mail some questions.

Ybarra: Very good.

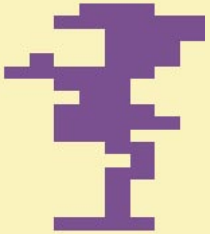
TGQ: Thank you for your time.

Ybarra: Thank you, and good luck with your article, and thank you for calling and talking about *M.U.L.E.*

TGQ: No problem, thank you very much.

Trip Hawkins

The next interview was done by e-mail, with Trip Hawkins of Digital Chocolate, who was the founder of EA, and the one who tracked down Dani in order to have *M.U.L.E.* made. While his answers are more formal (since they were pre-written), they are still incredibly fascinating, and they reveal a lot about both *M.U.L.E.* and the foundation of EA.



TGQ: Tell us about your involvement with the development team of *M.U.L.E.*: Dan and Bill Bunten, Jim Rushing, and Alan Watson. What were they like to work with?

Trip Hawkins: In 1980, I became one of the founding board members of Strategic Simulations Inc. This was one of the first computer game companies, and in 1981 they published a game called Cartels and Cutthroats that was a business simulator that I loved. When I founded EA, I went to Joel Billings of SSI and asked him if I could buy out his rights in C&C so I could make a new and improved version. He declined. So, I figured out who had made C&C and found Dan Bunten's name. I tracked him down in Arkansas and asked him if he was interested in having me fund an entirely new game with him that would try to be a more consumer-oriented simulation with a different theme. I had specific direction on user interface, player choices, degree of difficulty, and also how the rules of economics were to be implemented. I also ended up writing the manual because I understood intimately how the game worked and was capable of writing for mass consumers. Dan agreed with all of that, and he got his group together that became Ozark Softscape, and they came up with the concept of the robotic *M.U.L.E.* on the sci-fi planet. They got their inspiration for the look of the *M.U.L.E.* from the Imperial Walkers that had debuted in the second Star Wars film that had come out a few years before. The *M.U.L.E.* was cute, and the theme song that introduced the game is one of the all-time best. This became one of the first EA development contracts that I put together in the fall of 1982. These guys were truly among the nicest people I have known. Very good people, down to earth, unpretentious, while also being very creative and technical and professional. Bill was a very sociable guy who was fun to hang out with, but his contributions were minimal as he did not have a technical background or relevant experience. Alan was a quiet and solid technical guy. Jim was more of a management type and eventually took that track in the industry, working with EA for many years. Dan was the key designer, key programmer, and the leader of the group. Dan had a background, I believe, in architecture so he knew how to organize and plan a software system. He was a good leader because he had the right values. He cared about people and was very kind, and had a big personal commitment to innovation, technical quality, and using games to promote social interaction and learning. Of course this was many years before Dan became Dani.

TGQ: You mentioned designing how the economic principles were used in the game, could you elaborate on this?

Hawkins: The key principles were supply and demand and how they affect pricing; economies of scale and how they affect output and costs; the learning-curve theory of production and how it increases efficiency at a certain rate based on experience. In the game, one of the great strategies was to organize a way to control the market for Smithore by dominating production while withholding supply from the market. This would drive the price way up. We also increased the marginal rate of return as your experience of producing a certain ore went up. This gave you an incentive, like a real business, to specialize in certain areas and become the leader. The game had an innovative mechanic for the marketplace of buyers and sellers, where you literally walked up or down the screen to set your price, and if you intersected with another party, it would initiate trading. They presented all of these elements very cleverly.

TGQ: How many months did development take? Were there any hiccups?

Hawkins: The project began around October 1982 and was finished in May 1983 for the Atari 800, becoming one of the games that were part of EA's first product launch. Other versions came later for platforms including Commodore 64, IBM PC, and Sega. IBM paid us to make a version for PC Jr.

TGQ: Everything is very well balanced, how seriously was playtesting taken back in the day? Did the team really spend thirty-five hundred hours playing the game?

Hawkins: We did take testing seriously, and it was organized as an official department of the company very early on. Mark Lewis and Chris Wilson were the first testers hired by the company. Mark went on to become a VP at EA. Chris has been in the industry ever since and is now a manager of testing at Microsoft. Is the thirty-five hundred number from the liner notes? If so, it is probably tongue in cheek and a wild guess. But the truth is, of course there was a ton of testing! This was one of our first games and it was fun to play, so it got "tested" a lot.

TGQ: How did the Wampus come about?

Hawkins: Ozark came up with that one, but I'm not sure who deserves credit. As you know, there had been a popular text game on timeshare computers called, "Catch the Wumpus." I thought the way they implemented this in *M.U.L.E.* was ingenious, and it was a lot of fun. It became one of the industry's first examples of a "nice touch." That is, something that did not have to be done, but that was done anyway, in order to enhance the value of the play experience and give the customer something extra. Game reviewers would spot these things and say, "Another nice touch that adds to the quality and innovation is..."

TGQ: How well did it sell, relatively speaking? Did you have any inclination that more than two decades later it would still be receiving praise and page dedication in modern publications?

Hawkins: Commercially, *M.U.L.E.* bombed. It sold only twenty thousand copies. The album cover and name were confusing and failed to explain the beauty of the game. It won more awards

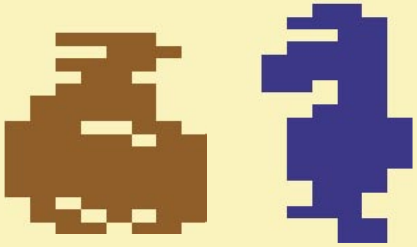
than any other EA game, including Game of the Year in Japan! But hardly anyone bought it. We sold many more units of the next Ozark game, *The Seven Cities of Gold*. And many more copies of early titles like *Hard Hat Mack* and *Pinball Construction Set*. We were all very disappointed that the public couldn't fathom *M.U.L.E.*, because all of the developers and employees and critics thought it was the cat's meow. This all contributed to *M.U.L.E.* becoming such a cult classic.

TGQ: Do you have any personal message or thoughts regarding the game, or anything related?

Hawkins: The vision I had for the industry was games like *M.U.L.E.* and *Madden,* games that are really fun, but satisfy my ethos of "simple, hot, and deep." My idea was that consumers would learn at the same time they are having fun, because they are thinking and getting their neurotransmitter connections made, but also because the topics and subject matter are worth learning about. And the games were high quality in terms of usability and professional execution, so they succeeded in their purpose. You cannot play *M.U.L.E.* without inadvertently learning as much as a college Economics 101 course would teach you. And you understand football much better if you play *Madden*. However, what is disappointing is how consumer interest moved towards the exercising of our testosterone, and towards property licenses that leave less room for innovation. So, if you wanted to present a topic like economics today, the producers today would put it in a Harry Potter game and would include shooting and fighting. Personally, I have a higher opinion of humanity and aspire to help people reach for that higher level.

Jim Rushing

My third interview was with Jim Rushing, who is still with EA. I first spoke with Mr Rushing via e-mail, where he elaborated on several points.



Jim Rushing: I joined EA as an employee in 1989. I was in the Redwood Shores Studio for sixteen years in a variety of positions: programmer, producer, technical director, director of development. I'm currently in EA University creating leadership training programs for development directors and producers (and still doing a little programming on the side).

I believe that the rights to *M.U.L.E.* are owned by Dan Bunten's estate, although I can't say with any certainty. Dan may have assigned the rights to EA during the aborted Genesis version. When I left Ozark, Dan bought my interest in the product, and as the others left, he became the sole owner of the property.

TGQ: Tell me a little about your role in development, and that of Dan(i) Bunten, Bill Bunten, and Alan Watson. I've heard you were the programmer, and according to Trip Hawkins, "more of a management type."

Rushing: There were four partners in Ozark Softscape: Dan Bunten, Bill Bunten, Alan Watson, and me. We all did various jobs, and each wore several hats in the company, as you can imagine. Dan—was the creative force and creative genius of the company. He was also a very good programmer. Alan—all art and graphics design and some programming. Jim—programming and implementation design. Bill—creative design, gameplay tuning, and business aspects of the company, no programming.

I met Bill in graduate school, and he introduced me to Dan. Dan and I immediately hit it off. Dan was writing a business-simulator game called *Cartels and Cutthroats* for SSI. Bill and I were his first testers. We would all meet up at Dan's house in the evenings and play the latest version of the game. By the time I had finished school, EA was getting started, and they contacted Dan to do a game. Trip had played *Cartels* and had loved it. Dan decided to quit his job as an industrial engineer and go full-time into gaming. I joined him shortly thereafter. We met Alan through mutual friends. Bill kept his full-time job as a directors of parks for the City of Little Rock and worked with us in the evenings and weekends, etc.

Trip was probably referring to my strength being more technical and management-related rather than in the creative-design arena. Although Dan was the driving creative force, we had regular design meetings where we all were able to express our opinions and ideas on the design. I was quite strong in implementation design, however.

We all know Dan was a genius … I feel

very fortunate to have worked with him.

TGQ: I've read that *M.U.L.E.* took several initial incarnations. Was anything left out of the final game?

Rushing: We can discuss more on phone, but … Trivia:

- Working title of the game was "Planet Pioneers."
- The "planet" Irata was "Atari" spelled backwards.
- *M.U.L.E.* came from the concept of the old Wild West (circa 1800's where you could strike your fortune with "forty acres and a M.U.L.E."
- Also influenced by a Robert Heinlein science-fiction story.
- The Wampus was a tribute to the very ancient Hunt the Wumpus game in BASIC that we played when we were learning programming.

TGQ: Can you tell us about Broadmoor Lake and Slick Willy's bar, and their connection to the game?

Rushing: The international headquarters of Ozark Softscape was a house we rented in a residential neighborhood in Little Rock, Arkansas. We each took a bedroom as our individual office. The house was great because it was quiet, had a huge refrigerator, couches, bean-bag chairs, etc. It was a very creative environment for us. As the game was being developed, the house was a perfect place to focus group parties. We would setup up multiple games in the den and living room of the house and have our friends play and give feedback. Broadmoor Lake was a small lake that was across the street from the house. When we were looking for inspiration, or just wanted to take a break, we would hike around the lake, sit under the trees, skip rocks on the lake, etc … .

Slick Willy's was a sports bar in Little Rock. It was close to the main Post Office, so when we would make a milestone delivery to EA, we would go over to Slick's and celebrate. They had arcade games and pinball, foosball, etc. And beer :) Just a place to hang out and relax after crunching to make a milestone.

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He then kindly provided me with his cell phone number, and we spoke as he was driving someone to their destination. An interesting conversation, since he came across as very human and shared many personal anecdotes, despite working at EA; a company with a reputation for having a, shall we say, different outlook on things. While I can't comment on what EA is really like, I can say that all its employees whom I have spoken to have been helpful, friendly, open, and above all passionate about videogames.

TGQ: Good morning … Do you have a few free minutes to discuss things?

Rushing: I do. Unfortunately you're going to have to bear with me, I'm dropping someone off right now.

TGQ: Oh, I'm terribly sorry about that.

Rushing: No, that's not a problem, it's just that you're going to be hearing a lot of other, ah, noises. If that's OK.

TGQ: No, that's OK, you've already answered quite a lot via e-mail. So I thought I'd ask for some elaboration on some things.

Rushing: Sure.

TGQ: I've read some reports that in the early '90s a sequel to *M.U.L.E.* was called off by Dani Bunten due to someone at EA wanting to add combat to the formula. Can you comment on this?

Rushing: Er, yeah. It's um … I don't want to get too deep into that. But basically, this was around the Sega Genesis period. I don't know, at the time I wasn't involved with it. I was at EA at the time, but was involved in other projects. And so I don't really know what transpired. So I don't really know if I should comment on what either Dan was feeling or what EA was feeling. But my understanding is that project just didn't work out because Dan and EA could not come to terms on the creative side. They couldn't come to an agreement. On the creative side. But I would be careful about positioning it, that it was because of weapons or things like that. I just don't know for sure.

TGQ: Can you comment on what development was like? I've spoken with Trip Hawkins and Joseph Ybarra on what the business side was like, and I was wondering if you had any personal anecdotes?

Rushing: Oh, well … there were just so many. It was a really interesting, innovative and exciting time, for me personally, and I think for the gaming industry as a whole. You know, that was back when a team of four people could actually make a game that a lot of people wanted to play.

TGQ: So you had a lot of personal creative freedom?

Rushing: Yes! For the most part. Of course, once we began working with EA, Joe Ybarra was our producer, and he was very much staying in touch with us throughout the development, and would fly out to Arkansas occasionally, although he didn't really drive the creative. But he was there offering suggestions and was a great sounding board for his interpretation of what the greater market was and what would resonate with them. And Joe was a big game player, so he came with a wealth of experience about playing games, and what he thought was going to work well with the audience.

TGQ: You were the programmer on the project?

Rushing: Well, yes, if you're going to put labels on people. Like I said in my e-mail, we all contributed to different parts. Like my, I guess you could call it my "day contribution," was the auction sequence. I designed it and programmed it. But, everyone … you know, we had these design sessions, so again, there were only four of us right? And we would sit around the table and just talk about the game. Everyone would have ideas, and contribute ideas. Undoubtedly Dan was the creative genius. I wouldn't want to take any of that away from Dan. I think he really was a genius. Hold on one moment…

[Speaks to passenger]

I would never want to take anything like that away from Dan. He really was the genius behind the whole thing. But, having said that, it was very democratic in the sense that, if I or Bill or someone came up with a good idea, and the group thought it was a good idea, we would do that. It was just a very tight, trusting group of four guys, as you can imagine.

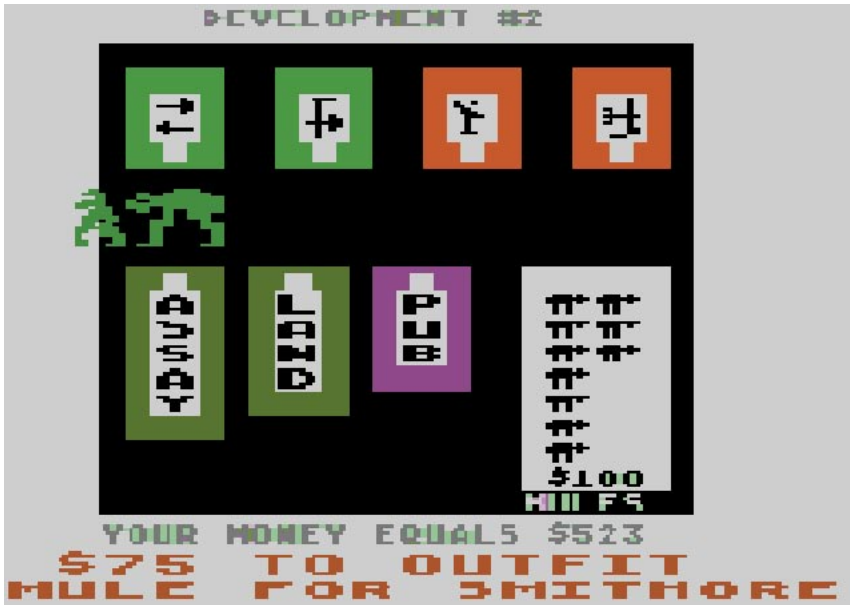
And because we rented a house, and it was a very laid-back kind of environment … It was a little bit like a fraternity, if you can imagine, and we would have people over there all the time, playing our games. And we would be working on them during the day, and then we would have people over in the evening to play, and it was such an environment that could make those turn-arounds in a day. So we could get the feedback from the previous day, and we could incorporate that and then have people back over the next night. So it was just a really fun and exciting time.

TGQ: Fascinating stuff, I like the sound of all that. You also told me some trivia in the e-mails? Like the working title was "Planet Pioneers."

Rushing: That was the working title for a long time, yeah.

TGQ: Were there any things that you wanted to include but were unable to?

Rushing: Wow, you know … I think that the little bit about the magic of *M.U.L.E.*, you know … and there has been so much discussion and everything on the net, and there have been these sort of tribute sites, and people have tried to design "*M.U.L.E.* 2.0," and so on, and they come up with a lot of good features and everything, but, I don't know … There's something that to me just says the simplicity of the original *M.U.L.E.* is hard to beat. And I think we did have some stuff that we couldn't get to, obviously every game development team does—so there's either things that they wanted to do that just wouldn't work at all, and they had to set aside. Or the kind of strain being such that there just wasn't time to finish everything. But to tell you the truth, I can't really think of anything large that we were not able to do, or that we had to set aside. We were pretty happy with the game. I'll just kind of leave it at that, I guess.



TGQ: Do you have any personal message or thoughts regarding the game you'd like to add?

Rushing: Well, I would just say, like I said in my e-mail, I feel really fortunate to have been a partner and to have worked with Dan Bunten. He was such a cool person on so many different levels, and he really, really had a passion for gaming, and he had such a great innate sense of what was fun. And I will just always remember the years that I spent with Dan, both through the EA period and before. Because I worked with him for about a year before we connected with EA. And you know, he had his own demons, obviously, but he was just such a cool person on so many different levels, and for me it was a very magical point in my life. I had just gotten out of school, so there was a little bit of the fraternity still going on, we were doing something brand new, something exciting, something a little bit out of the mainstream. I remember my parents being horrified that I didn't go and get a real job after school, right, and was going off and doing this computer gaming. They were … I mean my father was just, like, disgusted, and practically ready to give up on me. You know, but it was something that I felt I wanted to do, and it was just so exciting and brand new, and were just … And you know, it was small enough so that we could get stuff done, and there wasn't a lot of politics, and EA was brand new at the time, and EA brought a lot of really cool things to us as well. Working with Joe Ybarra was great, he was a really good producer for us. And EA brought a lot of the infrastructure that we didn't have, so they had some technical resources that we relied on, and some things like that. I dunno, I guess for me it was just a long time ago, but it was also a very magical time for me.

TGQ: That all sounds good. I think I have enough information here along with the e-mails to supplement the article. Thank you very much for your time.

Rushing: Oh, you're quite welcome. Any time. I am flattered that you contacted me and wanted to do an article on *M.U.L.E.* It's still a good game.

TGQ: Well, more than twenty years later, people are still playing it.

Rushing: I know! I was very intrigued by that link I sent to you on the network. I have actually not had the time to download that, and to try and play it. But it looks quite interesting, and I sent the link around to a couple of people, and they were very, very interested, and they thought it was a great idea to bring some of the older games back to a wider audience.

TGQ: I had a look at it.. [Explains emulators.] … Which is why I asked about the rights to the game. Because I was contemplating the idea of "what if *M.U.L.E.* was available on Xbox Live Arcade," multiplayer.

Rushing: Oh yes.

TGQ: Like *Joust* or *Gauntlet*. I was actually thinking of mentioning it in the article.

Rushing: You know, I think recently, your interest, and with this thing that

showed up on the net, there are a couple of people that are interested. In fact, the new executive producer for *The Sims,* his name is Rod Humble. He's from the UK actually, and he is a *M.U.L.E.* fanatic, and is very much thinking around in his head right now, how can we do something like that. But again, everyone asks about the rights to *M.U.L.E.*, and it's a little bit murky, I think. Someone would need to get an attorney to really dig down and try and understand that. We were one of the original contracts that EA wrote, and I don't know if you know this bit of trivia also. As it turns out, the launch for EA, I think they launched six titles when they first came out, that initial launch. I think it was six. But anyway, *M.U.L.E.* was SKU number one. And it was just luck of the draw because there was six that were coming out at the same time. But *M.U.L.E.* ended up being SKU number one for EA.

But anyway, what I was going to say is … I was part of the original contract for the game, and it was a very early contract for EA, and it was really unclear how the rights were going to live on. When I left the company, I sold my portion back to Dan. I think the other guys did also. So as far as I know, Dan ended up being the sole owner of the property. However, when the Genesis *M.U.L.E.* project was underway, Dan was starting to get sick. And I think there was some kind of a temporary transfer of rights to get the product done. Or something like that. But I'm not sure. But I believe that eventually the rights came back to Dan's estate. So I would imagine, if I was going to guess, I would guess that Dan's estate is still the owner of the rights.

TGQ: That's very interesting. And it certainly bears thinking about.

Rushing: It does. Ok, well, anyway, thank you very much, it's been a pleasure talking with you, and I hope I've been a help.

TGQ: You've been a great help; I'm honoured to have been able to speak to a member of EA and one of the original team members.

Rushing: So, I have to know, what did Trip and what did Joe have to say?

TGQ: Actually both were very complimentary of the whole group, and of Dan; and Joe said something along the lines of, it was one of the most interesting points in his career, and feels very lucky to have worked with the original team of four. Both had very, very nice things to say.

Rushing: Terrific. They're really good people, both of them.

TGQ: Anyway, I hate to cut and run like this, but … thank you very much! And I'll e-mail you at a later date regarding the progress of the article.

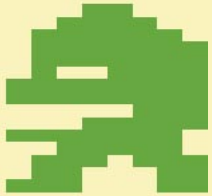
Rushing: That would be great, thank you very much.

TGQ: Thanks, bye.

Rushing: Ok, b'bye.

Ted H. Cashion

I also spoke with Ted H Cashion, via e-mail, as he was connected to the project and knew several of the people behind it. His e-mail is interesting, since it highlights just how much things have changed, and how far people have moved on since those innocent days in the early 1980s.



Ted H. Cashion: Hi, John.

Your e-mail brought back many memories. I definitely remember the development of *M.U.L.E.*, as well as *Seven Cities of Gold*. All this took place in Little Rock, AR back in the '80s. At that time, there was a very active Apple-computer-users group, The Apple Addicts. Dan served as the first president. By the time he went through the operation, we had drifted apart—computer clubs were no longer in vogue, and our paths seldom crossed. Also, I moved away from Little Rock in 1996, and have lost touch with all of the club members you mentioned.

I don't recall Joe Ybarra, but not all of Dan's company hung around the club meetings, which, by the way, were frequently held at the house where Ozark Softscape officed as Dan's games gained prominence. Have no idea where Bill is, but last I knew of he worked for the City of Little Rock Parks and Recreation Department. I vaguely recall Jim Rushing, remembering Alan Watson better as he also worked in a stereo store in Little Rock that I frequented.

Basically, the computer club supplied Dan with a great group of game testers. We would have some knock-down games of *M.U.L.E.* I even bought an Atari so I could play *M.U.L.E.* As you know, Dan was way ahead of his time in terms of multi-player and online gameplay.

It's been a long time, but there was a span of years where a bunch of us spent a lot of time together—testing games, fantasizing about how computers would evolve ("one day you'll have a megabyte of RAM …") over pitchers of beer. Glad to hear you're doing an article, and I'd like to help as much as possible, because Dan was a true visionary—I'd like to see him/her remembered properly.

Dan/Dani was way ahead of his/her time. A pioneer in multiplayer online gaming, he/she was way ahead of the rest of us, and is owed a debt of gratitude by the entire computer/videogaming industry.

Thanks for contacting me!
Ted H. Cashion
Memphis, TN