

# Where Are They Now?

By David S.J. Hodgson

We catch up with four of gaming's godfathers to relive the good ol' days—and find out what they've done for us lately

You all know who Nintendo's Shigeru Miyamoto is. Yu Suzuki is almost a household name (as long as that household flies a Sega flag and has a copy of Virtua Fighter in the game-room closet). And not a month goes by without a game magazine somewhere in the world running an interview with Shiny's Dave Perry. But what's happened to the unsung programmers and designers of yesteryear—the hermitic heroes of gaming? In this special eight-page kick-off to a new monthly section, we journey back to a time when unique gameplay thrills mattered more than marketing departments or the gift of self-promotion. It's time to probe the minds of four gaming godfathers—heck, let's call them gamefathers. We load up on their anecdotes and discover their invaluable contribution to gaming, as well as what they've been up to lately.

## David "Pitfall" Crane Gamefather of the Classic Console Game

A game-creating fiend with over 50 titles to his name, David Crane talks us through designing the seminal Pitfall!, speaks about the genre he helped spawn, and explains the value of Cheech and Chong in video-game advertising.

In the first half of 1982, David Crane wore many hats while crafting an enormous variety of games for the Atari 2600. He was a designer, animator, sound-and-music guy—even a tester. "In the early '80s we estimated there were only two or three dozen individuals in the world with both these left- and right-brain skills," he tells us. "In the design lab of the early Activision, we had five of these individuals."

As a member of this "Activision quintet," Crane started with a pencil, some paper and an original idea—which eventually blossomed into one of the most

beloved games of all time. He explains: "I vividly remember sitting in the lab with a blank sheet of paper, and saying to myself, 'I've always wanted to do a game with a little running man.' I drew the man on the paper and asked, 'What is he running on? A path. Where is the path? In a jungle. Why is he running? To collect treasure.' I drew the man, the path, a few trees, and a bar of gold. I incorporated a vine to swing on and the old cartoon effect of running across the heads of alligators, and the game was essentially designed." Right then and there, Crane created the premise of Pitfall! in about 10 minutes. The actual building of the game, however, took about 1,000 hours of drawing, programming, testing and debugging.

When it was time for gameplay tuning, Crane turned to the pros—the other guys in the office. "We would each take the time to play the other games as they neared completion," Crane explains. "We each made suggestions, and we all knew a good idea when we saw it." From early on, Crane and his cohorts had a good feeling about his rope-swinging quest for cash. In fact, the only real predicament was deciding on a name. "The working title was 'Jungle Runner,'" he says, "and it came dangerously close to going to market with that name. In the 11th hour, after two weeks of brainstorming, I finally suggested 'Pitfall!' as a pun. Someone else dubbed the hero Pitfall Harry, and the name stuck. That was really fortunate when you consider that the second choice was 'Zulu Gold.' Without Cheech and Chong as spokesmen, I don't think that name would have worked."

But Pitfall! did go on to smoke the competition in terms of sales. It spent 64 weeks at number one on the charts, sold over 3 million copies in one year, and became

Activision's top-selling game. It remained one of the best-selling titles in the history of the Atari 2600. And, of course, it helped expand the popularity of the platform genre, which was established by Shigeru Miyamoto's 1981 arcade hit Donkey Kong. "By the end of the '80s," Crane says, "there were more than 500 games in this genre developed."

### Where is he now?

"I left Activision in 1987 and did some [freelance] 2600 work," Crane tells us. "I then joined some friends at Absolute Entertainment doing NES and Super NES games. In 1995, I co-founded the Internet company Skyworks Technologies. We never believed that these mega-games were any more fun than a good single-screen game. We came to view the Internet as the latest video-game system, and with limited bandwidth, it is more like the systems of the past. We have to trade off memory, graphics, processor speed, and download time just like the old days." Check out the newest Crane creations at [www.skyworkstech.com](http://www.skyworkstech.com).



**Gamester Rap:** What makes this creative mind tick?

**Favorite Game?** "Tennis. I am a tournament-level player. You expected some electronic or board game? Reality is more meaningful. There are more important things in life than pixels."

**Favorite Game Character?** "How about my least favorite character: any karate-chopping, street-fighting, personal-combat game character. The worst prediction of my career was when I said [karate] games wouldn't last a year. In its purest form, a karate game represents good hand-eye skills and rapid analysis to counter an opponent. But when blood and gore were added to appeal to a 10-year-old's basest impulses, I was appalled."

### What is your motto?

"Crane's Law: that 'Man always uses his highest technology to amuse himself.' I came to this realization as a kid, [and] it still holds true today. IBM's Big Blue got no respect until they taught it to play chess. Today's video-game systems contain more technology than any system in use for serious work. I live by that motto—technology should be enjoyed."

### Gameography:

Too many to list, but here are the highlights: Outlaw, Canyon Bomber, Slot Machine, Dragster, Fishing Derby, Laser Blast, Freeway, Grand Prix, Pitfall!, The Activision Decathlon, Pitfall II: Lost Caverns, Ghostbusters, Transformers, Little Computer People Research Project, Skateboardin', Super Skateboardin', David Crane's Amazing Tennis, A Boy and His Blob, The Rescue of Princess Blobette.

Photography by Claudia Goetzelmann

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—David Crane



"My favorite character is still Ryu—I've been using him for over 10 years!"

—Akira Nishitani



Photography by Shuji Kondo

## Akira "Street Fighter II" Nishitani

Gamefather of the Fighting Genre

What's it like to create the first really innovative fighting game? We talk with Street Fighter II's lead designer about punching pads, pioneering joystick motions, perfecting Ken's power uppercut, and getting Blanka just the right shade of green.

Back in 1990, three years after the initial Street Fighter had hit arcades, Akira Nishitani—then a lead designer at Capcom Japan—was told to start sketching character designs for a sequel. Little did he realize it would become the first and most popular fighting-game franchise in the world. "We were told that Street Fighter was having a good response in overseas markets," he tells us, "but I wasn't satisfied with many aspects of the [first] game. I wanted to play as a character that best suited me, and there weren't too many games where you could choose your player at that time. That was my initial motivation." Out came the pencils and sketchbook, and the classic look of Ken and Ryu were created first. "They are the main characters after all," he says. Next came Sagat. Then came the obsessing over details.

Discussions about every nuance of Street Fighter II—from joystick motions to the look of the characters—continued for days. "Blanka's concept was a 'wild boy' from the very beginning," Nishitani says, "so his look wasn't very different from how it is now. He had much lighter and natural-colored skin at first. Then, someone suggested, 'Let's make him more butt-kicking!' and he ended up having green-colored skin [laughs]." As for everyone's favorite sumo, Nishitani explains that "Honda was literally a normal Sumo at first. Then I asked the designer to make him look more Japanese, and he got a Kabuki-style make-over and yukata kimono." Despite all the new characters, there's still only one fighter for Nishitani-san: "My favorite character is still Ryu—I've been using him for over 10 years!"

The plan wasn't to craft a simple rehash of the original game. For a



start, some of the Street Fighter arcade units came with punching pads: analog cushions that caused more damaging attacks when walloped with force. "I [initially] wanted to use those buttons for Street Fighter II so bad," Nishitani says, "but there were problems, such as the maintenance, the cost...so the idea was turned down." Nixing the whack-a-mole-style buttons created a more intricate game, however—one in which artful joystick wiggling and combination attacks took the place of puffy-button mashing. "If we chose the [punching pads], the



series might not have lasted this long," Nishitani says.

Of course, some of the first game's features did make it into the sequel. Nishitani's favorite is his preferred characters' flagship flourish: "Ryu and Ken's uppercut," he says. "If you are a man, go with a Dragon Punch [laughs]." Then came more innovations. "The button combinations are really the fun factor, but some people have difficulty with them," he explains. "So I came up with the idea of charging or tapping as a new input method." And although these ideas created a new gaming genre, Nishitani still wasn't satisfied. "Even when Street Fighter II was

finished, I still tweaked it," he says. "That ended up as SFII Dash [Championship Edition]. But after Dash was released, I still wasn't satisfied. I think that's the way it is for developers."

Even during the early stages of SFII development, Nishitani knew he had an addicting experience on his hands—especially as precious programming time was spent playing the game instead of fine-tuning it. "We were playing two-player mode all night long for over 100 matches consecutively," he says. That didn't stop the team from losing sleep over the game's chances. "This may not be easy to believe, but there was no custom for Japanese gamers to play against strangers in arcades, so I thought a two-player game might not be successful in Japan," he says. And he was initially correct—it took 12 months for the two-player fighting-game craze to catch on. But when it did, Street Fighter II kicked off a decade-long run of competitive play and paved the way for many more multiplayer games—as well as almost every fighting game you've heard of.

### Where is he now?

After the frenzied success of SFII, Nishitani stayed on at Capcom, intent on perfecting the fighting engine he helped create. Working on the seminal X-Men: Children of the Atom was just one of his fondly remembered tasks. Then he left Capcom and established a company called Arika. "Now I make more games," he says. "Remember that name: Arika!" One such game was the realization of the Street Fighter engine in three dimensions: Street Fighter EX. Nishitani isn't happy with how games have progressed—he'd like to see more innovation. And at this moment, he is developing a game called Diver for the PS2 at Arika. "Remember Diver!" he says.

**Gamester Rap:** What makes this creative mind tick?

### Favorite Movie?

"Titanic. I was almost crying in the movie theater, but the film also has an action element as well—that's why I liked it."

### Favorite Music?

"Mostly I listen to game music."

### Favorite Food?

"I used to enjoy a lot of meat and beer, but perhaps because of my age I now eat lighter meals—Japanese, like mother used to make. No more half-cooked onion!"

### Favorite Game?

"Crazy Climber, from Nichibutsu, is the best, most innovative game of all time. The idea of climbing a building and the two joysticks for control is so original. I haven't seen any other game surpass that in my opinion."

### What is your motto?

"Life is a game."

### Are you happy with how your video games have progressed?

"Street Fighter has evolved and diversified. If you compared SF to a man, he could be a middle-aged and austere guy. So I think it's about time for him to take a break!"

### How would you like to be remembered?

"I'd be happy if someone remembered me by starting a story with 'there was this huge video-game freak...!'"

### Gameography:

Lost World, Mad Gear, Final Fight, Street Fighter II, Street Fighter II Dash (Championship Edition), X-Men: Children of the Atom, Street Fighter EX, Street Fighter EX plus, Fighting Layer, Street Fighter EX3 (plus many others in a consulting or supervisory role).