

The History of “The Black Sage” by the PVT game team.

This story can either be long and boring, or short and boring. I’ll try for the latter but miss. Also, as much as I don’t want the story to be about me, all that I’ve got is my memory. It will seem to be all me which is unfortunate. I won’t specifically mention others. I haven’t contacted them. My guess, memories would be very different.

The programming team: in the late 1970’s, we were high school friends in San Jose. We were nerds – though that term had a slightly different meaning then. I wasn’t into science, but everyone else was. And we got into games. This was aided by the physics teacher at the high school who oversaw the Wargame Club (which got us games to borrow) and that a game store that opened in Campbell called “The Game Table”, a small independent store owned by the Duffields. The Game Table sold and hosted boardgames and wargames. AD&D had been published, and Dungeons & Dragons was becoming popular. We would eventual play-test our game at The Game Table.

One theme of this story is that none of us had money. It was the late 70’s, a truly bad economy, and we came from middle income homes. We didn’t have money. We weren’t poor, and several of us had cars, but the most expensive thing most of us owned was an electronic calculator. We simply couldn’t spend money on D&D books and manuals. The Game Table offered us “Tunnels and Trolls” – a more accessible RPG with an inexpensive rulebook – spiral bound with homemade sense to it. We bought one rule book. I re-wrote the rules to streamline, called the game Ogres and Orcs, and gave copies to all my friends.

Flying Buffalo also produced “Solitary Games” in a workbook format. Again, we couldn’t afford many of these (even though they weren’t expensive), but if you bought one that no one else had, and you swap them around. The solitary RPG games led to the creation of The Black Sage.

Though everyone in our group knew more about computers (along with science, math, and electronics) than I, I was going to find a way to own one. Relying much on friends, I scammed and schemed my way to a used Apple II – though without any memory. I eventually got the memory and a disk drive – though I acquired the drive in three pieces. The disk drive was a luxury. I even did a deal in the parking lot of the Apple Corporation – this is when they had 3 small buildings.

The idea of creating and selling software was about trying to get money to buy more equipment. No one thought this was a way to riches. I was interested in computers but no money. The games weren’t going to be a career for any of us, but they might get us systems.

The idea of producing a game probably started in 1979. At the time, there was one serious strategy microcomputer game that I knew of (there were arcade style games available), “Starfleet Orion”. I met with the creators of Starfleet Orion. I didn’t know much and chatting with people in the field was part of my education. I was curious about them not yet producing a version of the solitary version of Starfleet for the Apple. Two player games didn’t make sense to me, having to swap who was sitting in front of the computer. I talked about what I was working on and some of my concerns (graphics). We had a working copy of The Black Sage in integer basic at that time. The Starfleet Orion game loaded using a cassette tape player, but I wanted to use floppies. I would always try to swap for samples of work. The Starfleet Orion people didn’t want to talk much about D&D style games and didn’t want to swap. I wouldn’t learn this for a year or so, but they were working on their own dungeon system.

Starfleet Orion reminded me of the widely copied BASIC “Star Trek”. There was a good version of Star Trek on a friend’s Processor Technology’s SOL. I thought the upgraded version was very cool (I think this might have been Li-Chen Wang’s version). Of course there was also Wumpus which was so low-tech it wasn’t worth playing.

I don’t know where the idea of The Black Sage being a castle room-to-room game came from. It was coded by several people. I could do some programming, but for tough stuff and machine code and graphics, I relied on others. Again, I wasn’t a computer guy. I was trying to become more of a computer guy. Game writing was by committee. We’d be hanging out, and I’d say, “hey, we need to come up with any idea for a room in this game.” People would throw out ideas. It’s why there’s no story thread and the rooms seem random. Doing multiple choices for the rooms is how the solitary Flying Buffalo solitary games worked and it was easy to code.

Principles we believed were that the games should be re-playable, unlike the original Adventure Game. Once you learn to grab the wand and wave it in a particular room, or to say “zzyzx” (or whatever) in the right spot, the game is over. I wanted more than one way to win. It was not going to be a linear sequence of do this, then this, then this, then this, and you win. I wanted randomness. One last concept was that most of the games that existed at that time were ported from main-frame games. They were designed for teletype machines or scrolling CRTs – nothing where you could position a cursor. I wanted a “no scroll” policy. No text should ever scroll (not completely realized in Black Sage, but close). I didn’t ever want someone to call our games a “text game”.

One of the early programs I wrote for the Apple was to help run T&T games as DM/GM. That program didn’t care about the details or context of the game. It was a generic engine. I wanted to take that kind of openness to a game. I didn’t want a game where the mechanics of the game were simple and unique to the context. For example, there’s a unique magic word that works in only one place. I didn’t want that. I wanted non-secret magic spells that might work everywhere. I wanted to get closer to player moves that could be employed everywhere at all times, just like playing an in-person T&T game.

My job with the game was overseeing the project. I owned the computer, so people would have to come to my (mother’s) house to work on it. (There was only one other computer in the group of friends, and it was the Processor Tech SOL). I also was quality control, looking for problems and bugs. I admit two things on this. I thought “good” was good enough. I should have been asking “how can this be better – how can it be professional and marketable.” Second, I’m a terrible speller and couldn’t proof language. So all the language problems, and there are loads, are mine. One thing I remember, when the first version of the game was done and I started playing it, I thought it was too short. If you look at the map of the castle, on the right side, you can see a vertical line from top to bottom with seven rooms to the right. Those were added later because I thought the game was way too short.

The game was originally written in integer BASIC. I don’t remember why it was converted to AppleSoft. It took some time to convert. The variable structure was changed, and all the routines were redone. A concern was it meant people who had Apple II’s without the additional ROM card couldn’t play it. I remember there were technical issues about memory availability when using hires and the floating point BASIC – and it might have been the reason behind breaking the code into several parts.

Some ideas for the game were probably stolen. Ideas were stolen, not code. We never stole code. Who could we steal it from? But I didn't have an issue with borrowing ideas. I did do some of the coding, lots of print statements off of conditional statements. Anyone can do those. It also meant I was responsible for the words – something I wasn't good at.

I was to put the final finishing touches on the game, produce it and sell it. A friend got the use of a business's word processor and printer to produce the documentation. Another friend drew the cover. We couldn't afford any money for an ad in a magazine, so I started writing letters to computer stores. Heard back from very few. Sold very few copies. My biggest sale, whole box of copies, was to a company that went bankrupt before we got paid. I got some stores to carry them on consignment. I got few checks and got a few old copies back. I tried to get into Computerland, the largest seller of Apples, but didn't get anywhere. I didn't know what I was doing. That I couldn't sell the game meant I didn't have money to share with all the people that worked on it which led to a loss in enthusiasm. Plus, most of us where well onto other things, like college. The next plan I had was that when the second of our series came out, I'd go hard at sales again. I don't know if I ever gave up, but I eventually stopped trying.

Other software. One other piece of PVT software made it to market, and it out-sold The Black Sage. It was a music program for the Atari 800.

We had three other games in the works. Two were in the O&O series. I don't remember the title of the next O&O game (which bugs me) but the game was close to being finished. I was play-testing it quite a bit as the company slowly faded. This second game would be different from the first. It would not be jump room-to-room and multiple choice. Much of the game was run by machine code (we didn't have money for an assembler). The map was square grids (we hadn't advanced to the wargame standard of a hex-grid) represented on the hi-res (no grid lines, though). You were represented as a white square with dark square center and could move up, down, left or right. You'd find walls, doors, objects, secret passages and monsters (random or pre-programmed). The graphics were simple. The monsters were represented as numbers. For example, a "3" was an orc (or something like that). You could try to runaway from monsters. Sometimes they'd follow you; sometimes catch you. A whole dungeon level would be displayed on the screen at once. In this game, there were 3 or 4 levels of dungeons. Nothing complicated graphic wise, but not bad for the time. At times, you'd enter a room, and the program would kick over to text with some choices. My memory is that the game was mostly finished. I was working through final touches. Packaging wasn't finished, but beta diskettes were being tested. I think we had a cover but no documentation.

Here again is one of my faults. I had no problem with a player being a square and monsters being numbers. Wargames used cardboard chits with numbers on them, but better symbols, drawn by artists, would have been more marketable. The graphics were not easy. Someone had to write a separate program just to generate the map of the castle in The Black Sage which was then saved as a file. I don't know how the round turrets were drawn. I think drawing lines were easy, but not circles. Then putting text on a high-res screen meant creating character maps (instructions for moving and plotting individual dots) and placing that character location specifically. A lot of work went into the map numbers. I was proud of the work and thought it better than what I had seen up to that point. I wasn't about to ask the person who did the numbers to do the whole alphabet. There were video games that used the high-res screen, but not strategy wargames at the time.

The third game was going to be our attack on the Adventure games where you input words/short phrases. No hi-res graphics this time. We were developing the input routines which would expect people to enter verb-noun-prepositional phrase with the “prepositional phrase” our new twist. Second, we had developed disk subroutines to random-access a single track/sector on a disk. Then we created a compression system to get more characters into a track/sector (no lower case on Apple II, so using a full byte per character was wasting a lot of data). All the text was going to go on the back of the diskette. We figured our game would have about 40,000 words of text – which would be way beyond any game of its time. I don’t think anyone was doing 10,000 words of text. With 40,000 words built around a true battle system, I figured our game would make the others look minor league. I didn’t want a “text game” but I figured with the size, it was okay, and I was hoping we could still have a hi-res map of some sort.

What I didn’t think about was the need of someone to write those words, and I was critical of some game writing. I thought too many games had unsubstantiated solutions. For example, I was supposed to throw the orb into the water? How would I know that? I wouldn’t. Did the designers expect players to run around throwing the orb everywhere until they accidentally hit on the use? What makes someone believe that an orb will freeze the water? I wouldn’t mind the orb idea, but I’d have instructions on the orb, “to create ice, pull pin and drop in water”. This is why solution manuals became standard. I wanted to give people a reason.

I should have realized the importance of good writers when talking with another garage start-up called “Crystalware” where the owner/husband told me his wife did all the writing. Crystalware developed programs for the Atari 800. Some of our group wanted to do go with the 800, and maybe even partner or commission with Crystalware. That meant getting another computer. The advantage of the Atari was the graphics. This meant a lot of pictures and more words. Something we were not good at.

Though some code was completed and running for that third O&O game, the game itself was never created. I think there was a rough design of how the game might flow, working through three sections. Moving through a forest & valley. Then through a cave system. Finally into a fortress. Effectively, it would be three games in one.

Each game was supposed to allow more advanced play with more advanced characters, spells, and weapons. About this time, I had gotten my hands on the wargames Melee and Wizard (Steve Jackson games). That’s the direction I wanted to go, create an engine that would have fight sequences like those games, and then embed them in an adventure. (I also wanted to make Ogre a computer game).

The last piece of software PVT was producing was a wargame. It was a complete rip-off of an SPI game. It was a great game with some good programming, making a lot of use of the hi-res. It was finished except for the final sequence of play. One feature I thought very cool was the information display. With the high-res display on the Apple, you only had a few lines of text at the bottom (40 characters long). I think there were four lines, but there was a fifth that didn’t scroll that you could access. We needed to display more info than that. And we weren’t about to develop our own hi-res text display subroutines. What we came up with was horizontal-scrolling information bars, like ticker-tape on the financial cable channels. It was a Sci-Fi game, and with the horizontal-scrolling information updates running constantly at the top and bottom of the text area, gave the game a great look (for its day).

I'll mention two other ideas the group wanted to act on. One was that Apple II's had an extra socket for a ROM. An idea was to burn our own EPROMs for a game. Much of the game engine would go on the EPROM which would save room for the game. We'd sell the EPROM along with the games. I didn't believe we could get users to add a chip into their computer.

Another idea was to create a network and have multi-player games. To our knowledge, networks didn't exist. I acquire a better computer to act as the controlling computer, again acquired in pieces. It was an S-100 system with an 8mhz Z-80. It was going to be a home-brewed version of a Cromenco Z-1 system. We never got it working. I never thought it practical for commercial purposes. Who else was going to build an S-100 system just to hook computers together so we could play networked wargames? I believe one of the group eventually built a network between two micros, and wrote an interactive game.

I thought we could produce a better game than most being produced at the time, but not a better looking game. A couple years after everyone went in different directions, a friend showed me the newest popular adventure game. It had fancy color graphics (we were using a black and white TV to work on the Apple II). It looked great. I was able to get into the source code. It was horribly, unbelievably simple. I could have coded it – probably over a weekend. It was handful of flags and conditional statements. Why the game was popular was the graphics. Micro-Paint had been produced. They created a series of drawings that were loaded from the diskette. That was the game, several dozen drawing with a handful of simple logic statements. No battle system. You couldn't replay the game. Style over substance. To me, there's a reason we still play chess. Or poker. Or Risk.

Why was PVT's software unsuccessful?

We took too long to produce the game, and we didn't have enough of them. If we had gotten the game out a year or so earlier, and had produced a couple of follow-ups, it might have been different. Also, if we had ported it to TRS-80 and Pet, we might have done better. Black Sage could have easily been ported. All of us were in college, in addition to having part-time jobs to pay the bills. Buying computers, creating computer games and running a company on the side wasn't going to happen.

The second problem was the naiveté of the group. I was particularly naïve. I didn't know how to sell. I had no idea of what it might take to run a successful business. And I was the only person really interested in the business end of it and making money. I think I still had a kid's mentality where parents hang all your artwork on the refrigerator and you start to think you're a great artist when you're not. Much of what was accomplished was from the kindness of others.

I did get to meet some great people. I met Bill Budge who I think asked me about production and where to get diskette labels made. Bob Bishop (along with his business guy) showed me a copy of his Micro-Paint months before it was released. The business guy, who was one of the cockiest people I ever met, said it would change the industry. Looking at what they were doing told me we were over our head. These guys were so good. There was another guy whose name I don't remember, a major programmer of the time, who I spent an afternoon chatting with. I got to meet Captain Crunch, and he gave me a copy of his software he was trying to launch, a word processor for the Apple.

I had no idea how we'd ever be able to do advanced graphics. When Temple of Apshai came out for the Apple, I thought we were behind, but subLOGIC was the one that really got me. Someone showed me a copy of their flight simulator. By today's standards, laughable. Those days, I was in awe. Not just how the land moved. I was impressed by the instrument panel. It had circles and dials. It had words. I could conceive of creating some numbers and squares on a screen, but their flight simulator was beyond what I thought we were capable of doing.

SSI's Sink the Bismark came along that pushed boundaries, but I still thought we could do games almost as good as that. The bar was being raised in other ways. We put our games in plastic zip-lock bags. Games were coming out in boxes. We could never do that. Also, the technology was changing quickly.

Our whole effort was done on a shoestring. No one was paid for the work they did. Our inventory was a box of 100 Dysan diskettes which I had talked the Dysan corporation into selling to me at a wholesale price and 100 plastic bags. It's what we could afford. The rules were produced by talking a small business into letting us use their word processor if we included mentioning them. We didn't even have good quality equipment to make copies of the diskettes. I was worried about copies not working.

I was asked if I had the source code for the game. If not, did I have any of the original floppies? Those were the same thing. The game never existed on paper. Printers were too expensive – didn't own one then. The game was written and edited completely on the computer.

Two other stories. I talked to a lot of people, trying to fill in gaps of what I didn't know. In the process, almost every person I talked to had a story about working with Wozniak. It became a joke. Person after person telling me how they could have gotten in on the ground floor of Apple but turned it down. The interesting thing is that it was always about Woz. No one, NO ONE, ever mentioned Jobs. Woz was the guy, the creator and genius. I remember friends talking about Woz writing a program to estimate e to 100 decimal points. I thought, "how the hell does anyone do that?" I wasn't much of a coder and had little math in school.

Second, the closest we came to a claim of fame, somehow we had impressed someone with the games we were trying to create. A reporter from one of the main trade magazines heard about our efforts and gave one of us a call. Two or three of us sat for an interview on the "future of computer gaming". I said I thought computer games were going to become big, and the secret was to make them playable and complex. That there had to be better use of graphics, and text games were dead. That game designers should spend a lot more time thinking about their games than the people who play them. Ultimately, this is wrong. Games can have an illusion of thought and complexity that doesn't exist.

Thank you for your time. TB (one of the many contributors to The Black Sage)