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Lifestyles

June 9, 2002

Faces

Features

Club Scene

Home & Garden

Out & About

Style Briefs

Travel

Site Sections

A&M News

Agriculture

Announcements

Business & Technology

Classifieds

Columnists

Community

The Eagle

Entertainment

Faith & Values

Food

Health & Fitness

Kids Korner

Lifestyles

Newspapers in Education

Obituaries

Opinions

Politics

Region/State

Schools

Sports

Subscriptions

Weather

Game over

'Orbiter' creator reflects on bygone days of gaming

By LAURA HENSLEY
Eagle Staff Writer

The passive act of playing standard '80s computer games like Pac-Man, Pong and Q-bert wasn't enough for gaming gurus Don Gilman and Gordon Walton.

Instead of playing the games, they wanted to create them.

It was the mid-1980s — on the verge of an overwhelming explosion of personal computers and the computer gaming industry — Gilman and Walton were fresh out of college and already entrepreneurs.

By day the two friends developed their fledgling computer consulting business, but at night the real work began and their computer knowledge and love of gaming joined forces.

The process of creating their first game didn't happen in a glamorous technology-filled office building somewhere in California. It happened in a shabby bachelor pad in Bryan with computers set up on card tables and extension cords snaking across the living room and dining room — any space available to set up a mini computer laboratory.

"It was a computer geek bachelor pad," Gilman remembers about his old house in Bryan. "We were nuts. We had just graduated from A&M and we didn't have girlfriends. Any free time we had, we



Eagle photos/Dave McDermand

Top: Don Gilman, a pioneer of early computer games, holds up an "antique" Radio Shack laptop used widely in the '80s. The piece belongs to "Computer Game Making in the '80s," an exhibit on display at the Brazos Valley Museum of Natural History now through Sept. 1.

devoted it to the games.”

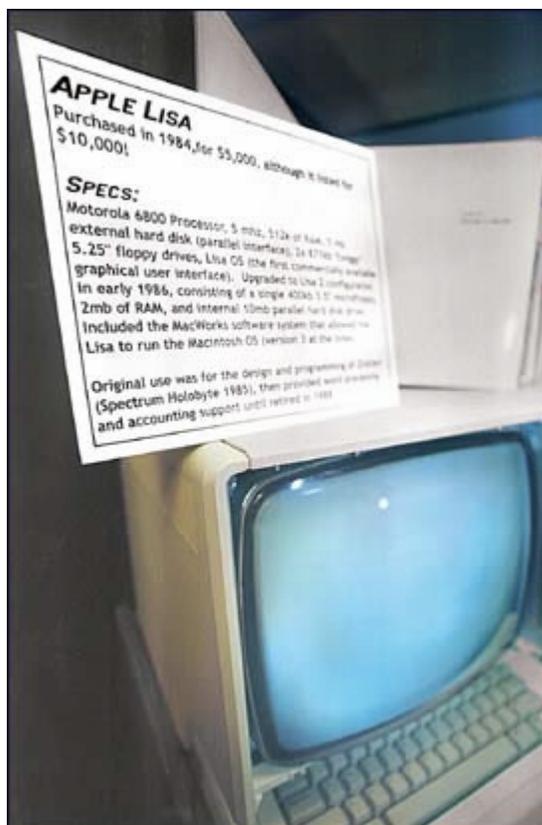
Gilman, Walton and other friends began creating a game after a friend offered the idea for Orbiter: a space shuttle simulator based on the actual commands and procedures used by NASA.

The technical manifestations Gilman and Walton helped create in their small Bryan home with their now antique computers would eventually become two influential computer games — Orbiter and Harpoon, the Naval and air warfare simulator game whose table-top version inspired Tom Clancy’s Red Storm Rising.

“That’s the way it was back then,” Gilman said. “There weren’t big game companies. It was guys in the garages and in their living rooms. A lot has changed.”

A new exhibit at the Brazos Valley Museum of Natural History captures the early the history of game creating in the Brazos Valley. It displays the actual computer equipment, hand-written notes and proposals Gilman and his team used while producing Orbiter, Harpoon and several other computer games during the 1980s and early 1990s. An Apple Mac SE 30 he bought in 1989 for \$2,500 and the Tandy Mode 100 purchased in 1984 for \$400 is encased in the exhibit. Other artifacts include old floppy disks and a giant Daisywheel printer used to spin out contracts and proposals for the games he created almost two decades ago.

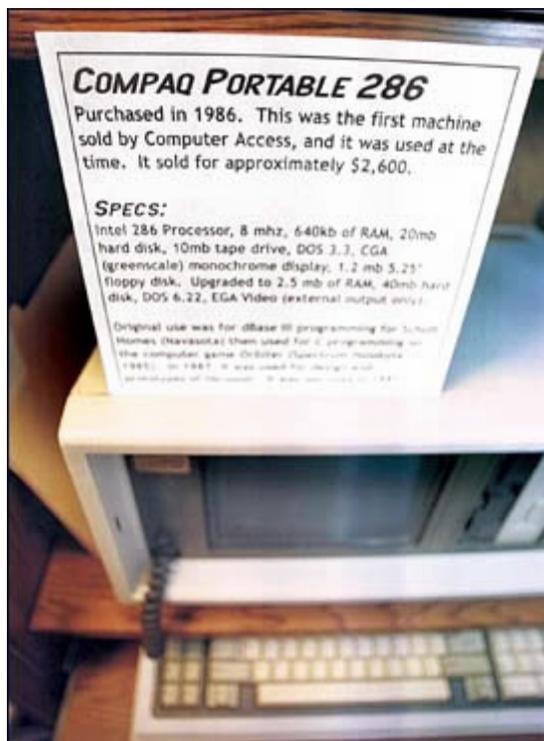
“I spent so much time with these items that I couldn’t bear to part with these things,” Gilman said about



the perfectly preserved equipment and original computer manuals. "I'm not a packrat. I just couldn't get rid of this stuff. It's been in my closets and garage for years."

Amy Witte, assistant curator of exhibits at the Brazos Valley Museum of Natural History, said the exhibit should evoke nostalgia in older people and spark curiosity in the younger generation.

"I had no idea that things like this happened in Bryan-College Station," she said. "I think a lot of people will be surprised to know that this happened in our own backyard."



Eagle photos/Dave McDermand

: Also on display are an Apple Lisa, one of the original Apple computers; and a Compaq 286.

Press start

Since Gilman was a child he enjoyed gaming. He remembers first playing a military strategy board game called France 1940. He dreamed of one day becoming a military officer, but later found out he would not be accepted because of his poor eyesight.

"I have always been interested in military history," he said. "Instead of reading about it, I could game it and see how it worked."

In 1978, his father bought a now-ancient Apple 2 computer for the home. Gilman fell in love with the idea of translating the table-top games he had been playing for years into computer games.

His parents initially warned him that making a living off computers would be absurd because of its small and specialized market at the time. Instead, they steered him toward engineering.

At A&M Gilman quickly became involved with the gaming clubs. He eventually mixed his fascination with computers and gaming when he began writing reviews of different computer games for specialty magazines.

Gilman received a degree in industrial engineering in 1984. That year, he and Walton formed Professional PC Services, Inc., an

information technology and software development firm now known as Applied Computing. Walton now lives in California and is the project manager of a popular computer game phenomenon, the Sims Online project.

After designing and developing Orbiter, which was released in 1986, Gilman proposed to create Harpoon — based on the 1980 table-top game by Larry Bond, who also co-wrote Red Storm Rising with Clancy.

“One Sunday afternoon Tom Clancy called,” Gilman said. “He said he would love for me to create the game.”

Since Harpoon’s release 12 years ago, it has been rewritten and re-released several times with an avid fanbase. It also has been recognized as an official training source for the Australian Navy and has received recognition from the U.S. military as well.

Gilman created other games after Harpoon, but eventually his involvement tapered off. “A change in priorities,” he says. These days he is busy running a business and helping raise a family. Free time is spent playing the games instead of creating them.

“The computer game industry has grown up, and I have too.”

Also on exhibit at the Natural History Museum:

- **Creatures of Perpetual Darkness** — The exhibit explores the unique life that exists thousands of miles below the surface of the ocean in the Gulf of Mexico. Photographs of strange and unique creators of the deep give visitors an up-close view of the environment below.
- **Ritual Art of New Guinea** — Precious ceremonial relics illustrate the importance and rituals of natives in New Guinea. Orator’s stools, clubs, shields, masks and human figurines are included in the exhibit.

Museum hours are Monday through Saturday 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. \$6 for adults; \$5 for Friends of the Museum, senior citizens, and children; children 3 and under are free.

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