



CHASING GHOSTS

LISA WIEGAND

By Elina Shatkin Photos courtesy of Men At Work Pictures, LLC

Before skateboarding, snowboarding and video games transitioned from niche hobbies to lucrative mainstream industries complete with their own aesthetics and icons, the first wave of video game champions were dominating arcades across America. Reigning supreme over the pixelated worlds of Ms. Pac Man, Centipede, Donkey Kong and the like, their unlikely mecca was the small town of Ottumwa, Iowa (current pop. 25,000) where the 1982 Video Game World Championships were held.

In the two-and-a-half decades since then as arcade gaming gave way to home gaming, what happened to the first wave of video game champions? This was the question that piqued the curiosity of filmmakers Lincoln Ruchti and Michael Verrechia after they came across a picture of the young video game champs posed in a yearbook-style spread from a 1982 *Life* magazine.

Thinking it might make a good documentary, Ruchti and Verrechia began digging into the story and contacting potential subjects. The eventual result was *Chasing Ghosts*, a 90-minute documentary that offers a where-are-they-now look at the first wave of video game champions while transporting viewers back to the heyday of arcade gaming.

To shoot the film Ruchti turned to cinematographer Lisa Wiegand, who had taught cinematography at Loyola Marymount University where he had been a graduate student. "I was immediately hooked by the subject matter because I loved the arcade games when I was a kid. I knew the movie was going to be popular because people are so into retro-gaming," says Wiegand. The popularity of electronic gaming combined with the current cultural nostalgia for all things '80s has proved her right. *Chasing Ghosts* was an audience favorite at the 2007 Sundance Film Festival where it premiered.

From the beginning Ruchti and Wiegand planned to shoot on video. "Unless you're Errol Morris or Ken Burns, it's difficult to raise the kind of money you'd need to shoot a documentary on film," says Wiegand with a laugh. "And high definition seemed like a good idea because we figured that by the time the film was finished, HD TV sets and DVD players would be in wide use."

At the time they began production, the bulk of which ran from April to July 2005, HDV camcorders had not yet been released. Their choice came down to shooting on one of the ENG-style HD cameras such as the Panasonic Varicam or the Sony F900. They chose the last

option and shot at 1080p at 23.98 frames per second. "I knew *Chasing Ghosts* had a good chance of being shown on a big screen, so I chose the Sony with its 1080 lines of resolution," says Wiegand. "I also thought the footage should have a nostalgic, film-like look. I wanted the film to have more of an epic quality and to give it more weight. Plus, I wanted the footage we shot to look contemporary with the archival footage."

Using few lights, a miniscule sound package (an old lavalier microphone and a boom mic that was generally affixed to a C-stand) and working with a barebones crew, Wiegand and first AC John Orphan set out with Ruchti and Verrechia on a production schedule that took them across the country.

Wiegand's entire lighting package consisted of half a dozen lights: a 4-bank Diva Kino Flo (with daylight and Tungsten balanced bulbs as well as a dimmer), a 650-watt Tweenie, a 600-watt open face light, two 200-watt Peppers and a bare bulb in a socket with an accompanying Chimera. Her grip kit consisted of one C-stand, one Mayfair clamp, a snoot for the Tweenie lights and a Road Rags kit. "We had no sandbags because there was no way we could have lugged them around," she says. "When we needed to weigh down a

light stand, we would use book bags or whatever else was handy." She also insisted on a CRT HD monitor, though it was only 9". "I don't like judging the image off an LCD monitor because I don't feel LCDs are as accurate as CRTs in their blacks," she says.

Inspired by the color palette of the Life magazine picture as well as a handful of other contemporaneous ads that had faded and shifted in color as they aged, Wiegand modified the factory settings on the F900 to yield deep magentas and crushed blacks with little to no detail in the shadows. She also desaturated the images a bit and tweaked the settings to make primary blues and reds pop. For alternate scenarios where there might be too much magenta, she created an alternate setting that was more desaturated and contained more yellows and greens in the high-lights. For instance, if she were shooting in a dark arcade and the shadow areas were getting lost because of the crushed blacks, she would alter the setting to add more detail in the shadows. Wiegand shot all the arcade game screens with a more standard color palette to preserve the vibrant, saturated

colors of the games.

Shooting in the homes and offices of the film's subjects, in most cases with no prior knowledge of what they would look like, Wiegand and Ruchti were keen to set up interview and B-roll shots that would convey as much about the subjects' lives as possible. "I couldn't make any of these locations something they weren't," says Wiegand. "It was really about looking around and finding where in the house their personality was. And if there wasn't any obvious place, we would try to rearrange objects to create that."

Syncing up the screens on the various games proved a bit tricky as every game had a different scan rate, but once Wiegand and Orphan learned the different scan rates it was simply a matter of going into the F900's scan function and setting the appropriate frequency. Wiegand shares, "We had to change the scan rate so often during the arcade scenes to avoid the roll bar on the screens that we got to a point where John had memorized the frequencies and would be able to dial in the games on-the-fly while I was handheld travel-

ing from screen to screen."

The trickiest shots of the film involved extreme close-up POV shots from inside the game cabinets themselves. Wiegand attached a close-up diopter to the Canon 22x7.6 1:1.8/ 7.6-168MM lens to achieve macro shots that included pans across wires, shots of quarters dropping into the slot, shots of circuit boards, glowing bulbs, resistors and other small electronic components. "We have this one great shot where I'm just tilting up along cables inside the cabinet but it looks like I'm jibbing up because of the distortion from the diopter," says Wiegand.

She continues, "My favorite shot in the film is a wide shot of Berzerk champion Joel West's house. The garage door is open and Joel is alone fixing his old Berzerk game. We shot it at dusk. The garage had a warm golden feel, and there were fireflies lighting up in the front yard. Just seeing him in that warm area of the cool night frame, alone with his game, was so moving to me. That shot expressed Joel's true love and real passion for Berzerk."