

# Oral History of Don Coyner

Interviewed by **Fulton Bryant-Anderson** for the Microsoft Alumni Network

August 18, 2023

## Preface

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Don Coyner as conducted by Fulton Bryant-Anderson on August 18, 2023, at Microsoft Studios in Redmond, Washington. This interview is part of the Microsoft Alumni Network's Microsoft Alumni Voices initiative. The goal of this project is to record the institutional history of Microsoft through the recollections of its former employees, so that the information may inform and inspire future generations.

Readers are asked to bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of the spoken word captured through video rather than written prose. The content reflects the recollections of the interviewee. The following transcript was edited by the Microsoft Alumni Network, which holds the copyright to this work.

## Interview

**Fulton Bryant-Anderson:**

Today is August 18 2023. I'm Fulton Bryant-Anderson, and with me is Don Coyner, Microsoft alumni. We're talking for the summer of 2023 Microsoft alumni network oral history project in collaboration with the Pacific Lutheran University Innovation Studies program. Thanks for being here Don.

**Don Coyner:**

Nice to be here.

**Fulton Bryant-Anderson:**

Just to begin, what is your name and how do you spell it?

**Don Coyner:**

Don Coyner.

**Fulton Bryant-Anderson:**

Where [did] you grew up? Where are you from?

**Don Coyner:**

By the way, if they're doing work and at a neighbor up there - if the hammering and stuff gets annoying, I can go inside.

**Fulton Bryant-Anderson:**

Okay. No worries.

**Don Coyner:**

I'm on Whidbey Island and it's pretty nice to sit on the deck. I was born in Wyoming. I lived there for 11 years. I lived in Minneapolis for a while, and then in Utah for eight years, and then got a master's degree at Northwestern in Evanston, Illinois, and moved back to Minneapolis and back [to] Chicago and then came to Seattle in 1988. Been [in] Seattle since.

**Fulton Bryant-Anderson:**

What were the early years like for you when you're a kid?

**Don Coyner:**

Well, my dad was a game warden or wildlife biologist. So being that we were just outside of Yellowstone so I spent a lot of time kind of in the backcountry of that part of the world and that was great. Yeah, I guess pretty simple life when you live in a town of 4000. No, no, I remember the first time I saw an escalator elevator. God forbid I don't even know you know, so it was Yeah. Pretty-Pretty nice.

**Fulton Bryant-Anderson:**

What'd you study at Northwestern?

**Don Coyner:**

I had a master's in integrated marketing. I went to the University of Utah as undergrad that was in communications.

**Fulton Bryant-Anderson:**

How did that prepare you for your future careers? Or career path?

**Don Coyner:**

I'm not sure that communications theory prepared me for anything. The masters was great because it was well set up to you know, recruiting and it was really focused on advertising. Agents, a lot of agencies, some companies mostly ad agencies, and I was interested in advertising. So, it gave me a really great preparation to kind of get into the advertising agency business.

**Fulton Bryant-Anderson:**

Where did you work after college? Was it directly to Microsoft? What were the jobs beforehand?

**Don Coyner:**

No, after? Well, my first job between undergrad and grad school I was working at the public radio station at the University of Utah and as a student and then I worked there for like a year and a half full time after I graduated for I forget what I was doing.

Then did the masters and then the first agency I worked for was called Campbell Mithun. And they were based in Minneapolis and I worked on the gentleman's business I worked on. First thing I worked on was Nature Valley granola bars. And then I worked on Golden Grahams cereal, which is still around and worked on Cinnamon Toast Crunch. When it was a new product and took that to market and that's still around. And I worked on a couple of other cereals that aren't around anymore.

And then after four years there I moved to Chicago to work at another agency called Foote, Cone, and Belding - Campbell Mithun has gone as an agency but Foote, Cone is still around I think. And there I worked on - Initially I worked on Kimberly Clark, the Kleenex business and all their paper clutter - their paper product stuff, and then I worked on Kraft Macaroni and cheese and all their dinner - box dinner products.

And then in 1988 I got a headhunter called out of the blue for a job in Seattle at Nintendo which I had never heard of. 1988 they were still fairly new. Oddly given my career and not much of a gamer, but I kind of went did some research on - that's when you had to go to library to do research. I found out they were an amazing company. It was a fantastic job. So, interview with them and that went super-fast and they offered me a job and so I moved to Seattle. And in that role, I handled all of their advertising, packaging, brand work. A lot of promotions

I worked with a merchandising team, retail merchandising team pretty much anything marketing. It was and still is a pretty small company. ...you wear a lot of hats and it was great... I looked at your profile. You may be in the games. I don't know.

**Fulton Bryant-Anderson:**

Yeah.

**Don Coyner:**

Well, the first project I worked on was the gold cartridge for *Legend of Zelda* for the Nintendo Entertainment System, which was pretty cool. And then so the NES was out, but we launched I guess about six months after I got there. I learned about Gameboy and so did all that work to package and advertising everything for Gameboy and launched that and then Super Nintendo and N64 probably made about 120-130 TV commercials over I was there seven years.

So you know handled all the launches for everything. It was mostly game, you know, hardware launch, but then they would spend the money on games marketing. And so yeah, that was an exciting time to be at Nintendo. And having recently watched the Tetris movie that was fun to see, you know, it was, you know, it was like, we kind of knew it was going on in the back. There was something going on.

When Howard Lincoln and Mr. Cowell went to, we came in Monday morning and we were asking where they were and they were in Russia. We're trying to figure out what on earth is in Russia? That's - but yeah, that was that was great fun. So anyway, it was an amazing time for them and it was a great place to work. I had a really good time, but after seven years I was kind of tired of doing the same thing. You know, making more commercials for video games.

At some point. It's like it's enough. And it was such a small company. There're not really opportunities to do other things there. So, I had a friend at Microsoft who suggested I come talk to them and I did and so in 1995, I moved over to Microsoft.

**Fulton Bryant-Anderson:**

What was it like to move from working on marketing and branding for like food products to Nintendo and that kind of diving into the tech world?

**Don Coyner:**

Yeah, it was a big change for a lot of reasons. First, just moving from an ad agency to the client side. You're managing the agencies- was a good transition. And you know, I've always found that whatever I worked on, I found some joy in it. Kraft was not the most fun group, I will admit, pretty stodgy advertising. Not - not the most exciting marketers. Now that beauty brand like Kraft macaroni and cheese. Really, it's the price that's going to drive sales more than advertising.

But at Nintendo that was really reliant on advertising, it was just so much more important to the business. You know, it was a lot faster paced. Things came really fast. We made fast decisions. We spent a ton of money. I had huge budgets to create commercials to buy media. It's a very small company, so the approval process was very short. You know, I take it in to my boss and then to Mr. [Minoru] Arakawa, who ran the place and you could be done in you know, 15 minutes of getting something approved, which was fantastic.

Had a lot of freedom to do stuff, had some great partners in the ad agencies I worked with, and we had a lot of fun. And so, it was just a very vibrant kind of exciting time to be there. And it was a good switch from - from the advertising side.

**Fulton Bryant-Anderson:**

When you got to Microsoft, what was the hiring process like for that?

**Don Coyner:**

Analysts? I think it took five months. And I later learned out why it took so long. I you know when you're going through an interview process, you don't know why they keep calling you back to talk to one more person and then 10 days later one more person. It was ridiculous. But I was kind of you know, I was quite surprised. Because I really liked the people more than I thought they would.

I had an impression of Microsoft as being kind of an arrogant company and Nintendo you know, it's quite close out in Redmond to Microsoft and went to the same health club as all the Microsoft anyway. When I went in the building and started meeting people, I realized, wow, this is fantastic. These people are great. I joined the hardware group, which was a very different, unique part of Microsoft.

So the mice the keyboards to game devices run by a really great guy named Rick Thompson who I'm still good friends with today, and - and so it was just yeah, the process was long and as it turns out, they had two - two jobs. One was a product marketer and the other was a product planner. He worked with engineers, and they had two candidates. And they couldn't - they were trying to figure out who was better for which job. So, they wanted to hire both of us. They just



didn't tell us that. So, they'd come in and have us meet, you know, different people and they were trying to just figure out what's the best fit?

Ironically, it turns out the person that got the other job was someone I'd worked with in Chicago with the ad agency. We're acquaintances, we didn't know each other well, but it was quite funny when I learned her name and saw her - it's like holy crap, this is she got to work at PlayStation oddly enough from- from the ad agency world. She kind of had the similar experience for me for with Sony and instead of Nintendo.

But yeah, and that, so the job was initially was to work on Sidewinder, which was their game device line, which I don't even know, I assume they don't make those. But maybe they do. You might know.

**Fulton Bryant-Anderson:**

They don't.

**Don Coyner:**

They got a joystick. We did a gamepad. We did a - a number of different controllers for PC games. It's a great product line and then I worked on mice and keyboards. We did the telephone to actually use Windows as the answering machine. Which was not a good idea given it was you know, Windows was pretty unstable in '95.

We did the first USB speaker system, digital speakers for PCs because you know PC speakers were pretty crap. We did fantastic speaker and subwoofer.

We did a toy called ActiMates, which was a company Microsoft bought that had technology to put some smarts into a plush toy. And they had licensed the character Barney, the big purple dinosaur. And so, we created a product that was sort of, I don't know foot tall, 14 inches tall plush, but it interacted with - made a few games so it interacted with games were early learning games, math and other things and the Barney character would actually talk to the kid as they were using the computer and you know that you got the right answer.

And we - we had encoded the - this was back in the days of VHS tapes. We encoded the videotapes of some of the morning shows with- so it would trigger Barney to react. Oh, that was funny. Didn't you think that it's kind of the idea of sit next to your child on the couch and watch the show with him. So that was amazingly fun.

You know it was Microsoft had never made a toy. We didn't have any connections with all the retailers that sell toys and Toys R Us was big in a number of other toy companies. And so, Rick just asked another guy

and I did go figure it out. And so, we figured it out. It was it was a blast to do that. So yeah, that was that was good time.

**Fulton Bryant-Anderson:**

What did you and your colleague do to go figure it out?

**Don Coyner:**

We found somebody in New York, who was a consultant in the toy business. Had worked with, you know, an infinite number of toy companies and went back and spent the days with him understanding what does it take to be successful in market with a toy? How do you think about the retail environment, retail displays, merchandising plans, [and] margin structure?

We went and met with Toys R Us and KB Toys and Target and Walmart and everybody to learn from them. Here's, you know, if we're doing toy, what would it what would you expect from us in terms of marketing, you know, so just met with as many people as we could to take part in Toy Fair, which was a big show that happened in New York in February every year where they- all the toy companies would come and show next year's toys and get retailers excited about what was coming.

And so, we had to do that for a number of years. It was another world from anything Microsoft did, that's for sure.

**Fulton Bryant-Anderson:**

Where would those meetings take place with those other groups that you're collaborating with?

**Don Coyner:**

Oh, in their offices, wherever they were. New York, a lot of it was New York. Toys R Us was in New Jersey Target's in Minneapolis. Walmart was in Arkansas. So, we'd go to them

**Fulton Bryant-Anderson:**

What other Microsoft teams did you work with or like coordinate with to kind of accomplish the marketing?

**Don Coyner:**

For that stuff? The sales team was the real major partner. Of course, engineering as we would learn I mean, we're working with - with the engineering team on feature sets, what does the product do?

And capabilities and we worked a lot with, we had some consultants who were helping us with child psychology, so that we were doing a product that was actually useful and not sort of not useful. So, kind of understanding kids and early learning to do the early learning software. You know, what, what kinds of things help kids learn. A lot of work with - with several child psychologists in fact we hired several child psychologists to be on the team. Hardware was a fairly small group.

You really worked with electrical engineers, mechanical engineers. We worked with the manufacturing team that went to China to see where these things were being made. You know, find out all the testing that happened. We needed to do, because when you're making a toy, it has to be pretty robust. And so how do you simulate? Kid drops the toilet rolls down the stairs, so they bought a clothes dryer actually and they put the Barney in the clothes dryer and turn it on and let it tumble. And see if it still worked.

So, it was pretty rigorous process and it was, again, the harder group was a great environment, great people. Everyone's super collaborative. Everyone wore a lot of hats. So, it made it a really, really fun time to be there and to work with that group.

**Fulton Bryant-Anderson:**

What was the genesis behind the Barney toy? How did it come to be?

**Don Coyner:**

Well, as I say, they bought this thing. I don't know before I got there, I think right before I got there. I think it was a company called Dare to Dream and they had come in and talked to Rick Thompson who ran hardware just about the technology. And at that point, you know, Microsoft was trying all kinds of stuff and Rick had a lot of latitude to make decisions. Hence, we

did have you know, the phone, the speaker those kinds of things, which was sort of out of character for Microsoft to do given it's a software company.

And he thought this technology was interesting and it's, you know, implications for software and hardware. You know, interaction and certainly different customer than Microsoft ever had, which was good. I think introducing people to the brand early is good. If they have a good feeling about Microsoft, you know, helps long term. I suppose those were the things but don't really know what the whole of the whole backstory was. On Dare to Dream.

**Fulton Bryant-Anderson:**

As you know, we're kind of investigating the role and like people's experiences work of Xbox can start talking about that. How did working on for instance, like a toy influence your work on the Xbox brand?

**Don Coyner:**

Well, you know, I'd worked at Nintendo for seven years, so I had pretty good understanding of that business. Before that helped me, I guess, with estimates in terms of understanding Toys R Us and other at the time. Huge, you know, retailers, Toys R Us was the largest game retailer out there. They were super important. So, I would say the Nintendo stuff was more useful than anything I did at Microsoft.

**Fulton Bryant-Anderson:**

When you were developing the brand for Xbox, what would what were keywords associated with it? What did you guys want it to be?

**Don Coyner:**

Yeah. Maybe a little backstory first, before we jump into kind of the brand stuff. Yeah, totally. There was a lot of, I don't know, have you watched the documentary that's on YouTube? [Power On: The Story of Xbox] But yeah. So, you know, the backstory.

I got drafted early by, if you know the characters, Seamus and Kevin, Seamus Blackley and Kevin Bachus. [They] strolled into my office one day and said, "Hey, maybe you don't remember us. We worked [together] at some. I don't remember who it was or who they worked for. Some video game company, but we worked with you at Nintendo, briefly." Because we worked with a lot of third-party game developers at Nintendo... And they said, "We're trying to get Microsoft to video game. We're trying to build a rebel team who wants to help with this cause and we're looking for people that have different expertise and you have video game marketing expertise, which nobody else has that we've found. So, would you join our rebel brigade?"

I talked to Rick who's running hardware, and he said, "Well, that's funny, they've convinced me to be their exec sponsor, so yeah, we should--let's do this crazy thing."

So we kind of signed up as did the other person they hired at the same time I did, Jennifer Booth joined, and we kind of between Jennifer and I, we divvied up responsibilities for the investigation that was so thoroughly covered in the [Power On] documentary, but there was a ton of work that went on that really wasn't covered [in the video series] because that was mostly about the system and the engineering part of it, but you know, on the marketing part of it, third-party distribution retailers. It was a ton of work.

So, my job I went out again and talked to retailers about "Okay, talk to us about video games, you know, how do we get shelf space, what - what's the margin structure, what kind of ad support." You know, all the complications that go along with getting into that business. The other chunk of the job was the working with third-party game developers and the licensing and the fees and all, you know, just understand kind of all of that.

The business - what the business relationships, we - like how you get Electronic Arts or Activision to write games through your system. And then the third part was brand and thinking about Microsoft, how does Microsoft fit? You know, if you've got a Sony, you've got Nintendo, you've got Sega. At the time, Japanese companies, were well established. Sega was kind of - they were on the decline, making hardware; people were sort of pissy about them. But like, how do you



position it because Microsoft was really seen as a [company with] business products and Windows.

Obviously, we needed to convince people that it [Microsoft gaming] was an investment they could safely make because there were a lot of bitter people who'd bought [competitors, like] Sega, [but] they kind of walked away from it and left [people] kind of high and dry, and [customers] were pissed off. And so how do you, first of all, convince [people], from a brand point of view, to build credibility? First of all, you're gonna make a high-quality system. You're gonna stick around. There's going to be great games. You can invest in this hardware purchase. There's going to be a library of content to, kind of, fill it up.

And so, we did a lot of interviews with people, all kinds of gamers of all ages, light gamers, heavy gamers, young gamers, old gamers. And we would do blind testing, you know, go out, get a group, and say, "Okay, what if Apple started making a video game console? Tell us what it would be like. Okay, what if Dell started making a video game console? What if, you know, pick a company? What if Microsoft started to make a video game console?"

Generally, what we heard about Microsoft was, they'd go, "Ew, Microsoft. If they made a console, it would "blue screen" [develop an unexpected system crash] all the time. The best game they would ever have

would be Flight Simulator. And they wouldn't have a clue." So, it's like, well, okay. Maybe you don't want to overplay the "Microsoft" part [in your product strategy]. Maybe you want to downplay the Microsoft part of the brand. That's important as an endorsement, because people did say, "If it has anything to do with Internet, it would be great, because Microsoft gets that... and Microsoft has deep pockets, so if they do this, I don't think they would leave [us] as high and dry. I think they would stick with it, which was a really good thing."

So, the Microsoft brand carried some credibility, and [offered] some positives and some negatives. When you think about positioning the product, [it involves] thinking about the product design. You know, the original console, [it was] big [and] black, you know. The idea was to go after hardcore gamers, initially, and thankfully *Halo* came along, which was the salvation, really. Once people kind of got a chance to play that game, [they] realized, "Wow, okay, these guys [know]. That's amazing." Then, that got a lot easier.

But as we thought about the first [consumer shows,] E3, CES, you know, that was huge. The Game Developer Conference [in early 2001]. Again, that stuff was covered in the [Power On] documentary, but that was a huge make or break kind of milestone. We had a lot of analysts who covered [the] video game industry who were following us, we were recording them, trying to convince them, know what we're

doing. You know, hiring the right partners in marketing, the right ad agencies, right? All that stuff. Getting the right shelf space, getting the right merchandising displays. All that was super important and understanding all of that was as important as figuring out the chipset and everything else. [The marketing] kind of went on the background.

I worked on that for, I don't know, however long the investigation was, six or nine months. And we would just jump on airplanes and fly around and meet people and all over the world. And it was crazy. Lots of people wearing lots of hats. And it was a blast. Amazing times.

**Fulton Bryant-Anderson:**

How did you sort through that busyness of research for those six to nine months?

**Don Coyner:**

Oh, just kind of take it one at a time. You know, figure out all that we need to know. How do we- what do we need to do to learn it? Sometimes get an outside consultant to help with research and help get this stuff set up. And yeah, just kind of go through the checklist of stuff we needed to figure out. Stuff would come up. We'd have to go back and talk to somebody.

We were worried about the third-party game makers in Japan. So, you'd need to go to Japan and have

some conversations and help try to convince them that this is real. You know, stuff like that. So yeah, it was- I thought that the [Power On] documentary did a good job of just demonstrating that it was really chaos. There was no- people just were doing what they do. And there wasn't anybody saying, "Okay, today this is what you know, it's like, okay, we're off."

**Fulton Bryant-Anderson:**

What were some of the daily tasks that you would encounter?

**Don Coyner:**

Well, just the stuff I mentioned, you know, figuring out what, what are the questions and then how do we answer them and get what we need and write it up and distribute it and see if it makes sense to people and, "Do we need more information?" and whatever. So, it was kind of, again, seat of the pants. Every day was different stuff would come up, you know.

**Fulton Bryant-Anderson:**

What tools or systems that you use to complete your work like computer software, email, accounting systems, business tools.

**Don Coyner:**

Oh, I don't know. I mean, certainly email. Not a lot of other. A lot of stuff is mostly talking to people and you know, bring it back to the organization finding the right partners, you know, ad agencies or others once we got the thing approved to, to help implement and stuff so a lot of face-to-face stuff.

**Fulton Bryant-Anderson:**

You brought up going to Japan. Was there a language barrier? Would you work with interpreters? What was that process like?

**Don Coyner:**

Yeah, in some cases they spoke English, but mostly it was interpreters. You know, having worked at Nintendo, I was - that was pretty comfortable. Because it's a very different business style. But Arakawa who ran Nintendo of America was Japanese. A lot of Japanese people were at Nintendo of America, so that was great. I love working with the Japanese, [they] are fantastic.

You know, they just, but it's a different pace. You know, you talk to him they listen they nod their heads. But yes, interpreters, for even if they spoke English that we typically they would want and they usually provided interpreters because then people staff that did that. So yeah.

**Fulton Bryant-Anderson:**

Let's see here. Can you describe like how the teams operated? Like if you're in a meeting who was on the team, what was everyone's roles, kind of after the research phase and kind of more into the boots on the ground work?

**Don Coyner:**

Yeah. So, after we got the project approved, then, you know, it was about building out a team and my responsibilities were all the MarCom [corporate communications] stuff. So again, advertising, packaging, public relations, promotions. And so, find an advertising manager, find a packaging manager, find a, you know- so it was probably a team of 30 or 30-40 people, you know, a bunch of PR people, messaging, you know, trade shows, all that stuff.

So, you know, initially the day to day was recruiting and building the team out and getting business partners in PR agencies and ad agencies, packaging design firms and then also working with the engineering team, like as they were designing the console, because I think when you build a brand, you know, the product is obviously more important than the messaging or the advertising or anything else. So, the look and feel of the product and the product experience was important. So, I worked with him a lot. Yeah, I mean, it was really chaos continued, I guess. [laughs]

**Fulton Bryant-Anderson:**

What sort of feedback would you give the engineering team?

**Don Coyner:**

Oh, you know, not a lot. I mean, everyone was going 180 miles an hour. I mean, when Todd Holmdahl brought in that Duke [Xbox] controller, put it in my hand, I passed out. My hand is, as it turns out, if you

size hands, my hand is of Japanese size perfectly. I have a small hand. And, [so I said], "Todd, this [large controller] is ridiculous. Like, this is completely ridiculous."

**Fulton Bryant-Anderson:**

I spoke with Todd this week about that.

**Don Coyner:**

You know, yep. It is what it is. And you know, that's what we have to ship initially [in 2001]. We didn't ship them very long, before we were able to get the smaller one. But everyone was just doing their best. You know, we had some amazingly talented people, but it was just kind of physics and getting stuff done. It was hard. So much to do. And so, it was a miracle that it all worked.

**Fulton Bryant-Anderson:**

What was particularly stressful on the MarCom side?

**Don Coyner:**

Oh God, everything. Transfers were really important. Getting the message right. Saying the right stuff that trade shows highlighting the right stuff. Because a lot of people didn't have the experience I did in trade shows, in, you know, in the console world. So, people like Ed Fries, who was running the Games group. We had a lot of good discussions about what should we show and how do you show it and all that stuff. You know, and advertise- there's got to be a lot of hands and stuff. You know, Nintendo was super-efficient. We moved really quick and made decisions and moved

on. [But] Microsoft, as the team grew in marketing, you know, it kind of bogged down, and so it was more tedious sometimes to get stuff done.

**Fulton Bryant-Anderson:**

What made it tedious at Microsoft?

**Don Coyner:**

Just, you know, getting approvals for stuff that seemed obvious that we should just do. And there were a lot of, you know, make a TV commercial for a game involved a lot of people, from the game people to the product people to the marketing, you know, it's just like, Oh, God. At Nintendo, we'd write it up -we'd go through the game, we'd pick out the highlights, we'd write a brief for the agency. They create some storyboards, we pick one, make like a TV commercial, and this [at Microsoft] just was not that efficient. So that was tedious.

**Fulton Bryant-Anderson:**

Can you describe are a particular moment where that happened at Microsoft and tell us tell us about it?

**Don Coyner:**

There isn't really one that stands out I guess. It was just yeah, there were crazy things going on. It was mucky from time to time. But, you know, everyone was doing [their best]. I mean, it wasn't like they weren't trying to be a problem. It's just, it's just a lot [of stuff] going on and people in new jobs and trying to figure them out. Some knew more about games than others. Somebody thought they were a genius,



even though they'd never marketed video games, they were marketing something totally different. And you know, knowing the categories I did, you know, you have to sort of teach people bring them along and if they're stuck, if they're stubborn, they don't want to. [But we would say,] "Well, that's the way it works." I'm sorry to say [this], you know, but yeah, it was - it was crazy and fun.

I did marketing through the launch of the original console [November 2001], then I was pretty burned out in marketing, and moved into the engineering team to do product planning. So, I was in marketing formerly for a couple of years, before I switched to the engineering side.

**Fulton Bryant-Anderson:**

What was the switch like for you after being burnt out?

**Don Coyner:**

A breath of fresh air, it was heaven. So, I'd gotten to know this guy named J Allard well, who was heading software engineering. I was just talking to him, and jeez, I was [feeling that] marketing was increasingly disconnected from the product. It's in a separate building and... it would be a critique that I have of Microsoft is that they separate marketing too much from the product, in my opinion. I think we [should] park people and allow them to wallow in the product and really learn it...

I said, “Is there a role in engineering to help you guys figure stuff out the customer perspective?” And [J Allard] said, “Absolutely, we have nobody who’s got the customer perspective, we would love to have that.” In those days, they called it product planning. But they were kind of marketing people who were embedded in the engineering team to help figure out the feature set, you know, priority features, all that kind of stuff. And one of the first things [I did was to research a concept] Bill Gates wanted, [which was for] Windows to run on Xbox. So, J’s like, “Seems like a bad idea, but I don’t know, why don’t you go figure it out?”

Then I go out and do a lot of research, talk to moms and kids, gamers of all kinds, and figure out how would they think about Windows on Xbox, and is that a good thing or a bad thing? And then [I had] to go tell Bill, you know, that it’s a really bad idea—and get yelled at a lot for that. And then they wanted to [explore putting] a DVR in [the Xbox console]. So, users could record TV shows, and [they wondered] how would that work? And that was another bad idea.

We were working on Xbox and we wanted to create a “live” service, [or an] online service. So, trying to figure out what Xbox Live would be like? What could be charged? How would you know? What would people like to do? There were a bunch of different things the engineers were being asked to do. And there weren’t

enough engineers. So how do you prioritize the work? And I had a small team. I don't know, four or five of us, I guess. We would work really closely with the engineers and just help them figure out what mattered and what didn't. "Let's not work on that anymore. Let's move over and work on this."

So, I just loved it. I love being at the heartbeat of the product being built, and I love to work with engineers. Mostly. [laughs] It was a blast that - that was fun. A very fun time.

**Fulton Bryant-Anderson:**

What were some of those scrapped projects?

**Don Coyner:**

Well, I mentioned Windows on Xbox, [and also] the DVR. We were going to make - Oh, geez, there were a bunch of different versions of Xbox they were talking about. Which, honestly, I can't even remember at this point, what some of them did. But there were a bunch of derivative things.

And we worked on you know, new controllers, you know, we helped the ergonomics team, and the hardware designers on game controller design and all that kind of stuff. We helped with that a lot. There were [new] features we were doing... remote controls, headsets. There was a ton of stuff that would come along and people would say, "Hey, we want to do a headset, you know what should it? How would it

work?" And so, we've kind of helped figure that stuff out, you know, in partnership with the engineering team.

Again, everything was in partnership, which was what was fun. But you didn't just go off and brainstorm things and [then] come back and dump them in. It was kind of an iterative process, you know. How long should the cord be? To the wall? To the power brick? That was an example of, you know, the engineers [said,] "We don't know. I can tell you what it is in my house, but I don't have any idea [about the cord]. How long should it be?" And things like that.

**Fulton Bryant-Anderson:**

Were those just weekly meetings at the Microsoft campus? Where would they take place?

**Don Coyner:**

Yeah, everything's at campus. And it was - there was no there wasn't any kind of structure. Stuff that, you know, you got an email or phone call. "Hey, we got to work on this. We need an answer. I need it day after tomorrow." Okay. Off we go kind of thing. Yeah, it was. It was you know, catch as catch can.

**Fulton Bryant-Anderson:**

How would you describe kind of like, like culture of it just being super-fast and spontaneous? It sounds like.

**Don Coyner:**

I'm not sure I have other words for it. It was. Yeah, a bunch of really smart people trying to do the right thing based on limited information and time constraints, and so this has to be out by Christmas. It only comes but once a year. How do we - how do we reduce the feature set on this so we can actually get it done on time? Argue argue, argue, agree, agree, agree, argue argue argue, you know, make a decision, move, go- kind of thing.

**Fulton Bryant-Anderson:**

Are there any moments that really stick out to you in that period?

**Don Coyner:**

Well, the whole Windows conversations stuck out. Should [Xbox] run Windows? Yeah, the Live thing was interesting. Xbox Live. Kind of understanding gamers' mindset around playing games, you know, the importance of playing together. Obviously, that's important. People love to sit on the couch next to each other. If you do an online thing, and you're playing with your brother halfway across country, [how does it work?] I yeah, there's just a lot of really fun things.

And we're all wondering, is that going to work? Will anyone pay us money every month to do that? Is that, you know, is it actually going to work? How do we figure latency out how do we like whoa, this is complicated. So, there are million components to it. How do you think about credits, how do we think

about a marketplace, you know, where you can buy things? The online store?

**Fulton Bryant-Anderson:**

Let's talk about the Xbox Live Marketplace. I mean, I thought it was interesting growing up, what was kind of the idea behind Microsoft points and developing that system?

**Don Coyner:**

Well, so as we moved from the original Xbox to Xbox 360, that was getting started as I was doing the product planning stuff and really the goal was to broaden the audience. You know, we'd been successful with hardcore gamers. But, to really - to succeed, you really need to broaden that audience out.

And so, at some point in there, I was frustrated with the designers who were doing the hardware, the controller, and the software dashboard. Because the original one, the hardware designers and the software people didn't talk to each other, which was why, when you turned that thing on and it had that - if you remember - that kind of neon green, you know, *Tron*, sort of thing. [But] it didn't fit with anything else in the brand. [The product ended up being] people left doing their best to get it done. But I was talking to J [Allard] as Xbox 360 was just getting started, and I'd worked with some of the designers. So [I made it clear] I was kind of frustrated with how they were approaching that process.

I said to J, “We have this chance with the Xbox 360 to do it really differently than we did the first time. We can work much more as an integrated team. We can like, as we evolve the brand, [move] from hardcore [gamers] to more all-family, [and] that impacts the design of the console [and] the design of the controllers. The look and feel of the dashboard, marketing materials, everything changes tone. And we should do that as one group, not as marketing doing their part, these guys are doing their part, these guys doing their part, etc. So, he came in the next day, after having a conversation, and said, “Okay, I loved what you said. I don't know how to do it. But effective today you lead Xbox design, and I want you to do all that stuff you told me you were gonna do, which is get everyone to work together and make this thing seem like one [integrated unit].” I was like, “Okay, well, I'm not a designer, and that's the dumbest idea I've ever heard.”

But J was a pretty convincing guy, and so I inherited some designers. And all the software designers were spread across the organization. Each worked for different engineers. We put them all together in one team, with the hardware people, and we worked the brand team because they were evolving the brand in marketing.

And so, we did a bunch of designs, we took them around the world to get feedback on, not specific

designs, but sort of elements of it. Because in Japan, they were quite particular about the shape of a console. They didn't like the original Xbox because it had a curved top, so they couldn't put things on top of it. So, they wanted something that was flat, you know and they wanted something that could stand up or lay flat, and there were a lot of things we learned through the process that people wanted. And so, we hired design firms in Europe, Japan, and the US.

They did a bunch of work. We narrowed it down, we consolidated it with a firm in Japan and in the US, and they both worked on stuff, and those things came together into one design. We thought about color choice, you know, white versus black [for the Xbox 360 console]. White seemed obvious, given [the effort] to be more friendly or family[-oriented]. But then, of course, we got retail concerns, because you're gonna have displays that have controllers in there, [and] that [prospective customers] play with all the time, and they get grubby... There are implications for kind of every decision you make.

And then even the brand logo, you know, the original logo was the X breaking through the ground. It was all about hardcore. And this needed to be softened. So, we had a sphere where the brand actually burned into it. It was very different approach across the board, and we kind of did all that in unison, as we were doing it. We did everything together, which was great fun.



So, the [Xbox Live] Marketplace, you know, the idea was we need to be able to sell stuff because we're going to have content that you can buy. Little content, you know, pieces for games, uniforms, or whatever, you know, trinkets and trash. And we were trying to think, like, how many things do you think we'd ever have in the marketplace? Like 100 or 500? Or? I don't know. And so, we did the design, we had these blades [Blades dashboard] that came in the Marketplace. It was a disaster very quickly because, pretty quickly we had 1000s of things, on a scrolling list. We had no idea, you know, if the Xbox Live [concept] was going to work, let alone you know, the adoption of that kind of stuff.

And so, let's say okay, well, I guess we need to redesign. I can't remember how long it took us- the next year? Maybe we did the redesign? To really accommodate the marketplace and everything that was going on in the chaos. That was- That was a shock. Again, we're learning this as we go, and there's no crystal ball that says, "Oh, this is what's going to happen. It's like oh, okay, well, that worked. Well I'll be darned." [The Xbox 360 Blades dashboard was replaced in 2008]

**Fulton Bryant-Anderson:**

How did those ideation process- processes go for with designers and your fellow teammates?

**Don Coyner:**

Ah, well, we talked to the game developers, we talked to the hardware engineers about capabilities we talked about customers- did a lot of manual testing, you know, go to watch people use the system. What were the frustrations? What do they like? What didn't they like? Bring that feedback back to say, "Hey, hardware guys, you know, they're frustrated that this happens, or that happens, or whatever, and we should look at this, we should look at that."

Then all the constraints, you know, heat is a huge issue, obviously. So, as we designed the console - being able to get rid of the heat, handle the heat, and get rid of the heat was a huge factor in terms of industrial design. You know, we developed that ring of light that was on there that turned into the "ring of death." But originally that [light ring] was going to be the Microsoft colors, and we'd have the quadrants [displayed] in red, yellow, green, and blue. But the engineers said, "You can't have blue, because it's too expensive. The LEDs for red, green, and orange can be had for, like a penny, but the ones that go blue, it's like 20 cents and you can't have one." So, we go back, it's like, okay, what do we do with that?

And then we talked to user [product] support people. Because we're thinking, "Well, you know, we have this [ring] that lights up. It tells you status." And we're looking at the average call time, or wait time, for people calling in for tech support. It was quite long. The tech support people are like, well, it's a nightmare, because it takes us 10 minutes [just] to

figure out what the problem is because people [are] trying to describe it. And so, we said, "Well, what if we made these lights available? And if you know, if this happens, then the right top green one flashes. And if that happens, the lower red one flashes." And they're like, "Oh my god that would change our lives."

And so, we worked with them on all the possible issues that come up [with an Xbox console]. And we assigned colors patterns on the ring of lights to them. There were a million little details like that going on in the background that ended up saving a ton of money and time, you know, [product support] call length went from 23 minutes to 9 minutes or something. I mean, it was massive once we launched. [But eventually] the heat thing obviously became a nightmare [causing consoles to fail], with the "ring of death" [red lights flashing], you know? But we got a lot of stuff right. The controller was fantastic. It's still a controller that we make. It was a fantastic controller-hardware guys did a great job on that. So yeah, [I hope] that answered your question.

**Fulton Bryant-Anderson:**

Yeah. One thing I wanted to ask about - this is a really like niche detail about the 360 but, I remember when I first updated from blades, it was like the blue background. What was kind of like the shift between having like the blue to the white for the home screen?

**Don Coyner:**

Um, well, I don't really remember that conversation. I think it was simplification and probably just a cleaner look. You know, not so much color. But because there was a lot of content that we needed to show and don't let the background color kind of get in the way and conflict. So, I'm guessing it was a simplification, and kind of just updating the overall brand, look and feel of the console frankly.

**Fulton Bryant-Anderson:**

I'm thinking a little bit like into the 360's lifecycle. There's always like those fan theories like "Xbox 720." And like what's next from Microsoft and Xbox? What were your guys's response to those if you recall it?

**Don Coyner:**

Stay tuned. All in due time.

**Fulton Bryant-Anderson:**

Would anyone entertain them like, you know, in the office what, rather than what was being kind of public?

**Don Coyner:**

Well, you know, as soon as you launch the first one, the team moves over and starts working on the next one. And so it's more figuring out what do we want to improve? How much was that going to cost? What problems do we need to solve? And so, there was, there was always future work going on. There was a small team, you know, that was working on the existing thing.

Obviously, it got to be a bigger team once the ring of death sort of came up because they had to figure that out because it was a whopper of a problem. But both on the software and hardware side, we did several updates to the dashboard with 360. But yeah, we definitely listened to the feedback and kind of knew what people wanted. And we're also getting feedback from the game developers and what they want. Because honestly, that was the biggest driver. Its what capabilities do you want this hardware to do? Is what do you want to have your game do? I mean, Nintendo was that was all about everything. Hardware came second, you know, Miyamoto would develop a game and go the hardware guys and said, "I need 3D rotation." And so, we put the little joystick on the top of the Super NES controller kind of thing. So, you know, it was it was really letting game developers drive a lot of those conversations, and us trying to do as much as we could, [considering] the budgets we had, and yeah, and time constraints because you always were gonna launch at Christmas more or less. And so, what all could get done- and you do a feature list and then you reduce it as stuff happens and prioritize - prioritize stuff.

**Fulton Bryant-Anderson:**

What game developers were particularly influential at that time for you guys?

**Don Coyner:**

Oh boy. You know, I think it's the obvious ones. The one you know, the Electronic Arts of the world kind of

thing. Activision. You know? Yeah, *Halo* guys. That was I mean, the internal studios and external studios, we had first party and third party. So, the first party studios, certainly. *Halo* was a huge driver in terms of what we what they wanted. But yeah, trying to listen to kind of all the whole voices.

**Fulton Bryant-Anderson:**

Thinking more about your role as like a team leader. What was your role essentially, how- and how did it change over time as you stepped into different kinds of products and roles?

**Don Coyner:**

Well, moving from marketing to design was kind of a big change because I am not a designer. I didn't go to Design School and so managing designers [was a big change]. You know, obviously, I kind of knew what they did and had worked with them a lot in the hardware group, you know, a group at Nintendo and console stuff. And so, I was comfortable in this space, but you're managing a different type of individual, different skill set.

Recruiting is really different. The kind of the work environment is different for a designer than a marketer. Working with engineers is super different than working with other marketers all the time. And so, I don't know, I guess my style sort of tried to evolve with the needs of the team and the partnerships we had, and what are we trying to do? So yeah, I was always sensitive in not overpowering the

designers because that's kind of their job and I'm, I would really, once I have the right team, let them make the final decision, not me, kind of thing. Give my opinion and that was influential, but ultimately, I figured it was their job because they would have spent their career doing this work.

How would you hire new employees? What sort of interview questions? What was the process? Well, if you're hiring designers, it's portfolio reviews. Collaboration was huge, huge, huge, huge. People that knew how to work with engineers. Who didn't want to just live in their ivory tower, to recognize that they're going to a great design, but there's going to be 20 reasons why that won't work, and they've got to be flexible about what how they redesigned to accommodate new stuff.

So yeah, portfolio reviews, a lot of it and just talking to people and understanding their styles, workstyles. Make sure they seem to fit. I don't need any hotshots, people who think they're better than everyone else. You know? You can get lots of ego in designers, and I had no tolerance for that. Because that was just not gonna fly at Microsoft. So even though they may be really good, it's just not going to work if they aren't collaborative.

**Fulton Bryant-Anderson:**

What would stand out in a portfolio for you?

**Don Coyner:**

Really the thinking behind it. How they- kind of what was the problem they were trying to solve? How did they think about the approach? Great to see two or three different design approaches, narrowed down to why they chose the one they did? What's worked about it, what hasn't? And they may well say, "Well, this is what we ultimately chose. And here's the five reasons it actually didn't work." But if they learn from it, and it was a rational thing, that's fine. It's, you know, we're all learning as we go through so that was a big part of that, less than just watching pretty pictures of beautiful stuff, was understanding how do you think about this? Why did you make this decision? Why did you make that decision? What were the tradeoffs you had to make? Talk about conflict resolution, who all was involved in decision making and how to work with them and all that kind of stuff. Example- give me some examples.

**Fulton Bryant-Anderson:**

What was it like to be in that role as someone who didn't have a background in design?

**Don Coyner:**

I thought was great. I loved it. I love designers, they're great.

**Fulton Bryant-Anderson:**

Um, let's see here. I guess the biggest thing, we talked a little bit about this earlier, but could you describe some of Microsoft's competitors while you're there



and how the company interacted with them. And to what extent of your job that was?

**Don Coyner:**

Um, do you want to talk about past Xbox or do you just want us is this really an Xbox focused sort of thing?

**Fulton Bryant-Anderson:**

We can do both.

**Overlapping**

Because I left - it's up to you.

**Don Coyner:**

Well, yeah, I left Xbox in 2012. So, I had like six more years of other stuff after Xbox. So happy to get into that too, if you want to.

**Fulton Bryant-Anderson:**

Yeah, we can talk about that.

**Don Coyner:**

So, a question on competitors, you say?

**Fulton Bryant-Anderson:**

Yeah, and how did the company interact with them while you were there? To what extent of your job was that?

**Don Coyner:**

We didn't interact with them that much. We certainly paid very careful attention to what they were doing. You know, in marketing. We really dissect everything they did. In the product, side, same thing. Yeah, just wander around a trade show and see what other people are doing, how they show their work, all that kind of stuff. But in terms of direct engagement with competitors not a lot really. I mean I had friends [in the industry] and you know, having worked on it for so long, I have friends kind of everywhere, but in terms of the business side of it, it's not like we're going to call them say, "Hey, how are we gonna solve this problem?"

**Fulton Bryant-Anderson:**

I guess was getting that is that like, how would you dissect like if they rolled out a new advertising, what were what were the meetings like, how would you dissect their content that's out?

**Don Coyner:**

You know, just understanding what it is their marketing, and how they tell the story. Kind of what they highlight. Yeah, it's pretty, pretty straightforward, really. It was interesting to look what they were doing in different regions of the world. You know, we'd monitor advertising in the UK, which was quite different than what they did in the US.

Typically, Sony was way out there, doing crazy stuff in the UK. So, our UK [Xbox] team did a crazy ad ["Champagne," in 2002], which we kind of did, and

didn't really tell anybody. I don't know if you saw it, that baby flying through the air, that was a great ad. But, you know, once the execs saw it, it didn't last very long. We kind of got some- Yeah, Robbie [Bach] was, you know, "whatever," but [it was banned in the UK by the Independent Television Commission]. Yeah, [we learned by] mostly just paying attention.

**Fulton Bryant-Anderson:**

Thinking about your time after Xbox. How do you think those skills transferred over? What was the changes?

**Don Coyner:**

Well, right after we launched 360, J [Allard] came to me. It was Christmas, right before Christmas, and said we are going to do a music player to compete with iPod. And I think your team should design it, so you need to hire a bunch of designers, because you're gonna keep working on Xbox.

And so, then it became, "Okay, we need to understand iPod really well." Again, we need to understand retailers. How do we get shelf space? Do we have a chance, we're late. You know, working with the press, reviewers, New York Times reviewers, or whatever. And then on the tech end, Microsoft brought together a whole bunch of teams and jammed them all together. Like there were three or four different music player things in the company, Windows Media Player, Media Center, I don't know, there were all these different teams building stuff that played stuff.

And so, they were all jammed together as one group. There were people who came in, got music rights. They had to go out, work with record companies to get rights, and then we had to design hardware, plus, we didn't have time, because we're going to launch. The hardware had to be done in February, and we found out about it right before Christmas. It typically takes a year [to create such a product].

So, we had a Toshiba device that we had to wrap with a different skin [or cover], and so we went to Japan and met with Toshiba, to find out what we could change. So yeah, we did three versions [or generations] of Zune [starting in 2006]. And I think it was a great product. It was too late in the market. You know, there's a great review of it in the New York Times. This guy, David Pogue, said if Zune had- I remember it so well- he said if Zune had come at a time without the iPod, it would be heralded as a god, but in a world with iPod, it's going nowhere. Which was really true because you know, Apple was on, I think, version three of iPod Nano by the time we got to the product we wanted, which was version three. You know, they were so far ahead of us.

So, retailers were like, look, it's a declining category. People are now using their phones for music. We have a bunch of we have iPods and we have a bunch of crappy, low end things that we make a ton of margin on. So, we're gonna give you like four inches of space

on the shelf [to sell Zune]. And it's like, okay, that doesn't work.

So anyway, that was crazy. But you know, the product was great fun. It brought together a whole bunch of people that were very passionate about music. That was a very different group. Very different dynamic than the gaming side of things. Then we decided to do the phone, the Windows Phone [launched in 2010]. So again, they asked my team to take that on. So, we added that to the group. And Media Center came in, and at some point the team was 230 or 240 people working across all the entertainment stuff. So pretty much all of Robbie [Bach's] division, we were doing the design for [them]. (I think at that point, we were doing all the design.) Which was great. So, we had an amazing team of people- hardware and software people- and doing some really good stuff. So that was a blast and you know, Microsoft, then, was doing a lot of interesting things, taking a lot of risks and trying stuff.

You know, it's gotten more, probably for very good reason, it's more focused now and does less crazy stuff than we did. And then there were changes, and J [Allard] left and Robbie [Bach] left and then I moved over to work in the Bing division on some early Cortana, which was the intelligent agent. I worked on speech recognition. It was a kind of a dog's breakfast of groups. It included speech recognition, Bing Maps, Cortana, and I can't remember what else- there were a few other things in there.

So again, it was design stuff. We were partnering, in that case, with Windows and with other groups to design stuff. You know, speech was kind of less highly used than it is today. So, it wasn't as big a priority. But designing for speech was really different. We had to learn a ton about how do you design for speech input. You know, because it's very different than mouse/keyboard, you know, whatever you touch.

Then I worked on Skype for three years, as that was kind of getting murdered. And then after that job, they asked me to move to London. They had a big team when they bought Skype, they had a bunch of people in London, and they wanted to send some ambassadors to help integrate the Skype team into Microsoft, because a lot of those people were pretty cranky that they were part of Microsoft. So, they figured I could be a good diplomat. So that was great fun.

I had a team and we did Skype for Business, which was the internal [project] that turned into Teams over time. And then you know, commercial Skype or consumer Skype or whatever that's still out there in a much smaller footprint than it was then. Certainly, outside the US it's still pretty, you know, it's pretty widely used. In the US, nobody talks about it. And then my last job was the Education group. So working with schools, teachers, on how to use Microsoft products, what features- we built a few tools for kids

and we also worked with teams and other groups just to bring some features to those products that were related to education for teachers. Because, you know, teachers don't have a lot of time, and they need help with us making simple things that they could just pick up and use, and not have to go through training to figure stuff out.

**Fulton Bryant-Anderson:**

I guess kind of starting to reflect a little bit, what did you learn at Microsoft that made a lasting impression on you?

**Don Coyner:**

Um, well, I think the three things that were the most fun, were ActiMates the toy, Xbox 360, and Zune. And I think the things that really tie all those things together were the teams that were just a joy to work with. Collaborative people. Everyone's supportive. People willing to wear whatever hat they need to wear today to get stuff done. No ego, or certainly less ego.

And so, I made some great dear friends. I'm still friends with [many of them] decades later. Even though we've all moved on to different things or retired or whatever. Certainly, that environment of working together. I think Microsoft is just such a great company. It's just so committed to making quality products. They stumble sometimes. It takes them a while to get there, but it's not because they don't care. There's a lot of passion around really helping people change the world- that kind of thing. I mean,

it's really true what the company does, it's unbelievable.

You know, when Satya [Nadella] came in and took over, his whole focus [was] on collaboration, working with third parties. You know, don't take an iPod or iPhone out of somebody's hand and throw it on the floor. You know, embrace it. Because lots of people using- I love just seeing that happen, and you know the energy, I think, that comes from that is really so important. I've always kind of been a collaborator. That's kind of my nature. But what certainly made a lasting impression is some of the crazy insane stuff that we were able to do only because people just set ego aside and got stuff done. That was pretty cool to see and be part of.

**Fulton Bryant-Anderson:**

How did your field over time change?

**Don Coyner:**

Well, marketing, geez, you know, I don't even know that I recognize marketing today because certainly Nintendo and Xbox was all about TV, TV ads, print ads, you know, there were a whole roster of game magazines we did. We got the *Xbox Magazine*, *The Official Xbox Magazine* and all that stuff. And today, you know, it's just so different. I wouldn't even know where to start. So that world is radically changed. And design certainly, there are more tools for designers to use, stuff's easier.



You know, in the hardware world there's more choice on materials, finishes. We wanted to do a leather Zune. Because we were really trying to differentiate it from iPod and iPod was a beautiful iconic product that people held at a distance and admired and if it got scratched- they cried. And our attitude was hey, music is very personal. Music is meant to be shared music, it's about you. You know, sometimes people are hesitant to share their playlists because it's so personal. And so why wouldn't your music player be personal? And so, if you do a leather one, it's like a wallet. You know, I have a wallet that my kid was young bit into and it's got teeth marks on. And it's like no, don't throw that wallet away! And so, we thought, you know, if this is so personal, why wouldn't we make a leather Zune? But back then it was so expensive and crazy. I think that kind of stuff would be much easier today.

So, materials, finishes, colors, the manufacturing process- much improved. But you know, the design process is still the design process. It still starts with a problem and [asks you to look] at different solutions and navigate through them. Parts of it haven't changed that much. I don't really understand how it works very well in a remote environment- that baffles me, because so much of it was done, just people turning their monitor around saying, "Hey, [what] do you think of these three things? Which one do you like? That one is great in the back." I don't know how that works in Zoom or whatever- that confuses me.

So, I guess I'm a dinosaur in that way. It's probably good I retired.

**Fulton Bryant-Anderson:**

What did you take with you when you left the company? How did you use those skills or habits elsewhere? I know you're technically kind of retired right now.

**Don Coyner:**

You know, there's just a ton of stuff you learn about the importance of prioritization. You can't do everything in any product. So how do you figure out the right things and how do you focus on doing fewer things well, than a bunch of things not so well. I mean, the startups I've worked with- I always tried to bring [a mindset of] don't make a mediocre product on every feature. It should not be mediocre and just work.

You should have a couple of standout features that are the really important ones and then let the rest come in v2 or v3. So, I think being realistic about what you can actually do, understanding the customer, and how to use it. What do they want? What don't they want? And collaboration. The importance of collaboration.

I think the realization that I don't think I've ever worked on anything I didn't like, even though I knew nothing about it when I worked on mice, people said

to me when I left Nintendo, "It's like you're leaving Nintendo to go work on a mouse. Like, are you crazy?" And honestly, the mouse business was one of the most fun businesses I worked on, partially because of the people, but we just had lots [to do]. It was amazing. You know, we changed the packaging [of our products], because we were selling basically the same product for 19 bucks, 49 bucks, and 89 bucks, and how do you get somebody to spend 89 bucks on a product that's kind of like the fifth one [in a series]? You know, that's all about shelf presence and there were really some fun marketing challenges there.

So, I guess I've learned that at the end of the day, a lot of this stuff is very consistent whether you're marketing video games or macaroni and cheese. I worked with a startup that's making an automated pizza assembly system and even if you look at that sort of thing which is totally a different food service kind of product, there's so much that's transferable in terms of the fundamentals of product development that that I carried with me.

**Fulton Bryant-Anderson:**

What did your Microsoft career enable you to do? How did it change your life?

**Don Coyner:**

Oh, wow. I don't know. I mean, I got to retire. It's great, made some awesome friends. Worked on some amazing- had some unbelievable opportunities to work on amazing cool stuff, that really couldn't have

happened anywhere else. [The company] just has the ability, given its size and willingness to do things, that [made it] an unbelievably wonderful place in that way. You know, it was - yeah, just not that many companies would do some of the stuff we did. So that was awesome.

**Fulton Bryant-Anderson:**

What have you done after Microsoft?

**Don Coyner:**

I worked with a couple of startups. I've been doing a lot of photography. Traveled. Oil painting. I don't know the stuff. You know... Talking to some people now, a few ex-Microsoft people I've worked with, about doing work with nonprofits. Trying to see how we give back, you know. A few of us are like, "Hey, we're retired. We still like to exercise our brains." There's certainly a lot of organizations that can use what we do in terms of how we think about things. Why don't we figure out how we connect with some of them and help them out?

**Fulton Bryant-Anderson:**

Were you involved with any like nonprofit charitable social impact work while you're at Microsoft?

**Don Coyner:**

I did work with a program called DECA, which is for high schools. It's a marketing thing. I did a ton of work with DECA for many years with high schoolers-mentorship and judging and that kind of stuff. You know, I volunteered at different organizations. But you

know, I was busy between work and family stuff. I didn't spend a ton of time doing different stuff. My brain was pretty full in those times.

**Fulton Bryant-Anderson:**

Thinking on a larger scale, how did Microsoft impact the world when you were there?

**Don Coyner:**

Well, you think about think about Windows 95. You know, the whole computer on every desk in every house, you know, kind of thing, was a dream, then that happened? Internet stuff. You know, just think of Xbox. You know, built this amazing worldwide brand. You go anywhere in the world and you say that name and people probably know what it is. It's kind of unbelievable.

I think the company has done a ton of good in terms of [being] focused on... giving back. It encourages employees to give back financially or with time. I think that's probably a huge impact. I don't know how much money Microsoft employees give away every year but it's all matched you know, and it's got to be a billion dollars. I don't know, a huge number. That's amazing. That goes on today. I just think it's one of those rare companies that just touches pretty much everyone's life. One way or the other.

**Fulton Bryant-Anderson:**

What are your reflections on your kind of contributions to that larger impact?

**Don Coyner:**

Yeah, I feel good about the opportunities I had to really make a big impact and work on big important stuff and make big important decisions. And, you know, choosing the name Xbox was kind of a big deal. Yeah, I had a lot of opportunity to own a lot of things and do them and that was great, great fun.

I think I impacted a lot of people who work for me over the years, and I've had many tell me, they learned a lot and appreciated me as a manager and helped them grow and learn how to work in a big company and all that kind of stuff. And so that that's probably the most important thing, is the impact you have on people and the friendships you make and all that stuff.

**Fulton Bryant-Anderson:**

Was there anyone that impacted you in particular, or anything like that?

**Don Coyner:**

Yeah, J Allard did. He was amazing, amazing, an amazing guy. He was hugely impactful. For me, Rick Thompson, who, as I said, I'm still friends with, and was a great mentor. Robbie Bach was a great mentor. He's a great guy. I haven't seen Robbie in a while but we get together periodically and go for walks and he's always - he's always so generous with his time. And then I've just known some amazing people who maybe they worked for me, you know. It wasn't that

they were leaders but they were just- they brought amazing personal attributes and we've stayed friends. Some really, very long-term friendships.

I got together with somebody a couple of months ago, and they said, "When we met, you were like buying your first house, and you just had your kid, and now your kids are all in college and you've sold that house, and we've known each other a long time." And that's pretty cool.

**Fulton Bryant-Anderson:**

How do you think those people impacted you and on what kind of scale?

**Don Coyner:**

Oh, it varies, you know, huge to a little bit. But you know, take the good stuff. Leave the bad, I guess.

**Fulton Bryant-Anderson:**

What are some of the good things, if you want to share?

**Don Coyner:**

I just think when you're a manager of people, I think making sure you put them in the right job [is key]. You give them the right opportunities, you set them up for success. If they're doing great, get out of their way, but if they need help, you help them. But you know, give people a chance to fly and assume they will.

[And] not waiting for permission. That was always Rick [Thompson's] big thing. You know, because Nintendo was very much permission-based. You'd go in and get approval. And everything was fast, but you need approval. But you had to ask. At Microsoft, Rick's like, early on, he's like, "Why are you asking me? Just do it. If you think it's the right thing to do, do it." And J said that all the time, too. He's like, "Why ask him? You just do it. You're smart." And so that took a while to kind of adopt. Like, okay, but it's like a multimillion-dollar decision. OK. All right. I'm sure.

**Fulton Bryant-Anderson:**

See, is there anything else that you want to share as we kind of wind down here?

**Don Coyner:**

I don't think so. It was a great opportunity and a great time.