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Austin at SXSW 2013: Andrew Bujalski, 'Computer Chess'

By [Jordan Gass-Poore](#) on March 22, 2013 - 10:00am in [Local Indies](#) | [SXSW](#)

Austin transplant [Andrew Bujalski](#) has been putting audience members in check since the world premiere of his fourth feature *Computer Chess* ([Debbie's dispatch](#)) at this year's Sundance Film Festival. The critically acclaimed, Austin-shot film, about an eccentric group of computer chess programmers who gather at a hotel for a chess tournament in the 1980s, got back to its roots Monday when it screened during SXSW 2013.

Bujalski found most of his merry band of polyester-clad "nerds" through an open casting call for extras, although he already knew local actor/computer wiz [Wiley Wiggins](#) (*Dazed and Confused*), whom he met in Austin back in 1999.



Extras (including Slackerwood contributor Rod Paddock) joined the cast for 10-plus hour days during the summer of 2011 and grew in numbers for the movie's tournament hall scene. With the air conditioning turned off for sound recording purposes, Bujalski says the cramped room "got to smell very bad." But even under these sometimes grueling conditions, the unpaid extras returned to set day after day with the promise of free food and a chance to embody a culture that excites and motivates them.

Although *Computer Chess* has been met with positive acclaim by SXSW festivalgoers (despite Bujalski's initial thoughts that the movie would "alienate" audiences), most of those who experienced the culture it portrays firsthand have yet to see the film. *Computer Chess* is scheduled to be released by Kino Lorber late this year. In the meantime, the movie's next screenings will be [at the Sarasota Film Festival](#) in early April.

I spoke with Bujalski earlier this week and found out fellow Seguin High School alum [Carlyn Hudson](#) was one of the film's co-producers, that there's a Goodwill Computer Museum in Austin, and that I can buy a vintage camera for under \$100.

Slackerwood: How did you find your way to Austin? I understand you're originally from Boston.

Andrew Bujalski: It was semi-arbitrary in a way. I mean, I first moved here in '99. I was a year or two out of college and I think I always had a kind of semi-inexplicable hankering to live in Texas 'cause it seemed so kind of foreign and exotic to me. I was young enough that I could move somewhere just because it sounded fun and exciting and interesting, and Austin, it is and has been for 30 years a kind of some sort of mecca for young people looking to have a good time. And so I came down here for that reason and I ended up -- I was only here for about a year then.

I left in pursuit, trying to make my first movie and I ended up coming back in 2007 to shoot my third movie [*Beeswax*], also kind of a long story -- it somehow ended up making sense to do it here. So we shot it here and then very much to my surprise, it had not been part of the plan, but I started dating somebody during that production. She's from D.C. and ended up here the same way I did. She had first moved here when she was young and it sounded fun. And then suddenly I had this serious girlfriend who I was not running away from, so I came back and married her and bought a house and had a kid. I've been back for real for five years now.

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Did any of the same crew from your *Beeswax* work on *Computer Chess*?

Bujalski: Ya, there's some folks ... **Houston King** is a guy that I've worked with a lot, so he's the executive producer on the third one and he's a producer on this one. **Scott Colquitt** -- I think his first film job he ever had was a PA on *Beeswax* and now he's an associate producer on this one. **Anne Dodge**, who acts in both movies.

Why keep it local? Is that an important factor for you?

Bujalski: It's not a Hollywood production. Of course you do things locally, unless there's a reason not to. It's not that I object to out-of-towners, and in fact, there are certainly some out-of-towners in the cast and on the crew. Matthias Grunsky, who's my cinematographer, who's worked on every movie I've done -- he's from Austria, he lives in L.A. now. So, it's not all local folks. It's mostly local folks just because they're here and they're great.

What was the casting process like? Specifically, how did Wiley [Wiggins] get involved?

Bujalski: I met Wiley when I first lived here when I was in my early twenties. Of course, I'd watched my VHS tape of *Dazed and Confused* many, many times. I was of course starstruck and excited the first time I saw Wiley, whenever that was in '99. My roommate at the time ended up working as an animator on *Waking Life* and so I got to know some of those *Waking Life* folks, and I got to know Wiley a little bit then. By coincidence we ended up moving to Los Angeles at the same time, which was not really probably a good move for either of us. So, we really became friends there in L.A., when we were both kind of ... bums, and have stayed pals over the years.

You just think about resources, friends you have or people you'd like to work with, like to do a movie with, so I always liked the idea of doing something with him. When I started thinking seriously about doing this movie he seemed like such an obvious fit because *Dazed and Confused* in particular will mean that he's always beloved by a certain segment of the population and it's a classic performance in a classic movie, but the acting thing has always been kind of, if not an accident, at least a kind of secondary thing. He's an excellent actor and I'm so happy every time I get to see him act, but it's not his main thing in life. He's much more a computer guy than an actor guy. Wiley was a huge part of the team of this movie, not just in front of the camera, but also at every stage of it. He's had input and insight that's been very valuable.

What was the open casting call like? I heard a ton of people came out.

Bujalski: It was awesome. I think this movie has the greatest cast ever assembled, but I think it also has the greatest extras ever assembled. I couldn't believe the quality of people we got and who were so sweet. Being an extra sucks, especially on our shoot. We're asking these people to dress in kind of ridiculous, uncomfortable clothes. They were a great group of guys, and I say guys because it was a lot of guys. It's very male dominated, as obviously that particular culture that we're representing was.

I think for the most part they really enjoyed each other, getting together a lot of very like-minded people. We were reaching out to people in the computer community, the chess community, people who were really enthusiastic about this culture we were portraying, which is why they look so right on in the movie, these are the real guys.

The movie opens with this kind of faux documentary footage of these guys being interviewed about their programs and that truly was one of the most remarkable things I've ever had the privilege of being near as a director because that stuff was completely off the cuff -- that was an experiment. We were in that room and we said, "Let's just interview the extras in character." They weren't prepped for it. We didn't really have anything prepped. We just started rolling camera and talking to those guys and some of them had this knowledge and others, I think, as we were going around the room shooting they were pulling out their iPhones and looking up things on Wikipedia that they could say in character. And the footage is just unbelievable.

And that's why I chose to open the movie with it. If you had shown this to me I would buy it as documentary. These are solid gold extras. I was so happy with those guys. I love them.

Did they come in with their own wardrobe?

Bujalski: Some of them did, but we also had an unbelievably dedicated and talented costume designer [Colin Wilkes](#), and [Mikaylah Bowman](#). Our costume department got all these guys outfitted every day.



You shot *Computer Chess* on a vintage Sony camera. Was this your own camera or did you purchase it specifically for the film?

Bujalski: I got one on eBay. I started thinking I wanted to make a movie on this type of camera, so I went on eBay and got one for I don't remember how much, but I think it was probably about 50 bucks. And then when we got serious about putting the movie together, we went on eBay and got another one. The third one I think we borrowed from a camera collector.

Were some of the other props in the movie, like the vintage computers, acquired in a similar process?

Bujalski: Ya. We got really lucky in the case of the computers. There's something in town called the [Goodwill Computer Museum](#). So much of this movie was on incredible luck. I don't know if another one of these exists in the country, but here in Austin, Texas, they have a computer store and you can bring your old computer there and they'll harvest the parts and sell those. But attached to the computer store they have a little one-room computer museum, which is all these beautiful old computers. Behind the museum is a big warehouse full of old computer stuff. They couldn't have been more helpful to us. I could be wrong, but I don't think we paid a dime for them. And about a third or half of them worked.

What did you do to prepare to write this script? Why this subject matter?

Bujalski: I don't know. I'm not knowledgeable about computers. I've always been really fascinated by chess, I've always really liked to read about chess -- I've never been any good about playing it, though I've never had the discipline to be good at playing chess.

As far as the specific language -- this is actually the first movie where I didn't have a conventional screenplay, We did just work from an 80-page treatment. Part of the reason for that was because I knew there is going to be so much tech stuff in this, so much specific jargon that I could sit there and do my best to educate myself about, or I can just cast real computer guys who know how to talk about this way better than I could and get their input and get them to make it come to life. So that's what we did.



What have been some of the audience reactions to the film, especially from those who are knowledgeable about computers?

Bujalski: The big question mark for me still is how will the real members of that specific community, these actual computer chess programmers of that era, how are those guys going to respond. I still don't know the answer to that because for the most part they haven't seen it. Although, I did send a copy of it to a professor named David Levy, who I believe in 1968 make a bet that no computer would beat him in 10 years. That was something we borrowed from his biography to put into the movie. Otherwise, that character in the movie is completely made up and is in no way based on this particular guy. But still, I was worried. I thought, "Oh, God, when he sees the movie, is he gonna think that we based this guy on him and is he gonna hate it?" I was so relieved that he seemed to like it. I thought the movie would be much more alienating than it is, better luck next time -- alienating people.

I can't even imagine what these guys who lived during this time think about how being nerdy is trendy. Do you have any comments on the evolution of what it is to be nerdy?

Bujalski: I think that the hardcore nerd in some ways still exists. I think. I hope. But I think of those old-school guys at the cutting edge of artificial intelligence at the time as being like monks: people who are incredibly committed to the exclusion of everything else -- and this is what people made fun of them for. But ya, they went out and conquered the world and now it is a different world. Now it's a world where people who have really nice haircuts and go to the gym and drive nice cars and have good-looking boyfriends and girlfriends call themselves nerds, and that's not the way it was back then.

Our chess adviser on the movie, [Peter Kappler](#), is a great looking guy who's in great shape and I believe drives a nice car; he's not a poser, he's the real deal. He's super smart and he has his nerd credentials in order, it's just that it's possible to live in both worlds now in a way that maybe it wasn't so much then.

[Photo credit: Andrew Bujalski, by Alex Lipschultz; Computer Chess cast and crew at SXSW Q&A photos by J. Kernion. All rights reserved.]