Rare : The Minds behind the Mystique

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Un article très complet sur le développeur anglais Rare.

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It is one of the world's most renowned developers. It possesses a catalogue of titles spanning almost two decades. And through its relationship with Nintendo it has become one of the UK's biggest exports. And yet, apart from broadsheet coverage of its absorption into the Japanese-owned monolith last year, the UK's greatest videogame success story has deliber-

RARE
THE MINDS BEHIND THE MYSTIQUE

ately avoided the attention of the press. Ten years have passed since a games magazine was granted full access to its development facilities, in which time the company's publicity-shy reputation has been reinforced (wielding a dictaphone around these parts is tantamount to carrying a gun). But after years of waiting, **Edge**'s chance to infiltrate its tightly knit operation arrives. So what's the secret?

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f Rare's low profile is a conscious effort to distance itself from the hype that fuels the games industry, its farmhouse location at one end of a rural village in Twycross, Warwickshire, certainly cultivates the myth. There is no company sign at the entrance, just a portentous notice concerning the presence of guard dogs. But heading down the driveway into the central courtyard past a couple of free-roaming chickens, a car park packed to capacity with new sports cars finally betrays the company's videogaming heritage. A Lotus Esprit SE, a Mercedes SLK, and assorted pokey coupés and hot hatches all fast enough to terrify the average driver, congregate with an unassuming regularity. The couple of Ferraris lurking in a garage are perhaps the best evidence that potatoes and assorted veg aren't what earns a crust here.

The company's reticence to reveal much about its operation can be traced way back to when it was shaping the future of 8bit computer gaming as Ultimate Play The Game. Even then, well over a decade ago, it deliberately steered clear of making its presence felt at the major computing events of the day and distinguished itself from the low-rent crowd with clever teaser advertising and quality packaging. Even its game manuals were unconventional, often using quirky riddle-based messages to unravel their mysteries. The fact that many of the company's vast catalogue of classic games for the 8bit computers are still fondly remembered by gameplayers today is testament to their ingenuity.

Edge has been on Rare's case since the magazine launched in late 1993. Back then the company was in a hazy transitional period with its attention divided between 8bit and 16bit technology, but also with an expectant eye focused on the possibilities of 'Project Reality' – something which would later become the Nintendo 64. This investment in state-of-the-art workstation technology directly lead to the creation of the landmark SGI-rendered Donkey Kong Country and more recently has allowed the company to set a new high watermark for 64bit software in the form of GoldenEye and Diddy Kong Racing (see p84). Both these titles are ample proof that the company has matured into one of the world's major game development concerns.

Edge's visit to Rare is something of a privilege.

Kong Racing, for example). However, such is the level of secrecy employed that journalists have been confined to the protected environment of a demo room instead of being able to roam freely around interviewing its staff (only possible with prior submission of

The company's reticence to reveal much about the way it designs videogames can be traced back to its 8bit days

For the magazine, that is. This is conveyed by the surprise elicited from Nintendo's US PR department that vaguely remembered when Rare's doors were last properly opened to a games magazine (the NES was state-of-the-art technology at the time). More recently a few games journalists may have made the trip to the Midlands to get a look at titles due for imminent release (Diddy

questions via fax or email). Even on this occasion the company ensures a dictaphone is running all day to simultaneously tape all communication with Edge. Paranoia, perhaps? Well, yes, but it's paranoia with a capital 'N' and that's the difference.

The morning of Edge's visit is beautifully clear and sunny, with a refreshing Autumn bite to the air. The photographer assembles the GoldenEye team in the dazzling daylight for a group shot while Edge meets the Rare guard dogs, which calm down enough to be stroked after their initial bout of frenzied barking. Despite this potential flaw in the security, virtually every building has a security camera on each corner perpetually scanning the farmhouse and its outbuildings. Eagle-eyed visitors might notice how the cameras themselves bear an uncanny resemblance to those featured in GoldenEye, tracking the casual stroller in a sinister fashion.

Perhaps understandably, Rare doesn't take any chances when it

1983	1983	1984	1984	1984

In the early days, trading as Ultimate Play The Game, Jetpac was a big hit for the Stampers

Ultimate's creative spirit was unleashed in 48K (Jetpac used 16K) with the classic Atic Atac

Knight Lore was revolutionary, introducing 8bit computer users to the wonders of isometric 3D

Despite being 2D, Underworlde, released at the same time as Knight Lore, was another hit

Entombed was Ultimate's second C64 game, and was loved and loathed equally

comes to keeping its best-kept secrets well out of the public gaze and the result is an office complex with a security system more suitable to Fort Knox than a videogame developer. But while many of its neighbours have suffered from break-ins, Rare's intimidating CCTV and surveillance systems have so far proved an effective deterrent.

Given the close business links Rare enjoys with its its closest partner, Nintendo of America, a 6,000-mile gap actively discourages interference from the parent company. But considering its rich heritage of videogame production it's perhaps surprising that Rare hardly ever receives fan mail and the vast majority of customer feedback is directed at NOA in Redmond on the west coast of the US. Rare's location may not be publicised – the average uninitiated American gameplayer probably doesn't even realise there is any differentiation between the Nintendo brand and the curious Rareware logo. One eager American fan obviously did know the difference, though, and actually crossed the Atlantic to track down his favourite developer. But incidents such as these are, appropriately enough, rare. Being off the beaten track does ensure it

Rare's security is watertight – most buildings have infrared cameras so that any unwanted visitors are captured on film for the benefit of the local constabulary. The cameras' similarity to those which feature in N64 *GoldenEye* is actually no coincidence

relative obscurity compared to most large-scale developers. As managing director **Tim Stamper** puts it, 'It's insulated'.

Being insulated isn't just a result of its geographical position, though. It's virtually a self-enforced doctrine adhered to by its 100-plus staff that helps to ensure information about its games stays within the company's walls. This is a kind of loyalty that seems to be embedded in the fabric of Rare's culture, rather than just the result of an repressive directive from the company's

Curiously, and possibly one of Rare's most revealing traits, is the fact that almost all of the 100-plus employees at Rare joined the company with no games industry development experience. It's hardly an accident either, and there is a genuine belief here that while a lack of experience will mean more training in the beginning, it often harbours a great desire to succeed and means its new staff are unlikely to bring bad habits with them. *GoldenEye* artist Karl Hilton completed a BA in Architecture until he realised it would be more

Being insulated isn't just a result of geographical position... It's almost a self-enforced doctrine adhered to by its 100-plus staff


Trespassers should avoid the 'fierce' guard dogs. Unless they want to be licked, that is

management. It stems from every staff member feeling like they have something to gain from protecting their work until it's complete. Despite this, former **Edge** staff writer George Andreas – now working at Rare as a designer on *Banjo-Kazooie* – recently confided that it would be 'more than his job was worth' to leak information about any undisclosed projects in development at Rare. And far be it from the magazine to have ever considered him a placed source...

fun designing underground military bases for James Bond to navigate rather than real-life buildings. Meanwhile, Lee Schuneman left a career marketing swimming pools before his stint at Rare which now sees him as producer/designer on *Diddy Kong Racing*.

But how does a company that relies on inexperienced staff manage to release such a consistently good games? Is it simply a case of having a different attitude? **Edge** hopes to find the ▶

1988	1990	1990	1991	1995
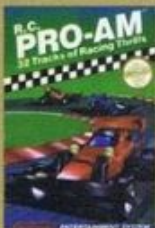
RC Pro-Am was one of Rare's most acclaimed NES games. (Look for an influence in *DKR*)

Solar Jetman was an admirable attempt at bringing the space-bound hero of *Jetpac* to the NES

Rare reverted to isometric 3D for *Snake Rattle 'n' Roll*, another sizeable NES success

Battletoads: Rare's attempt to outdo the faddish Ninja Turtles

ACM on the Game Boy? Well...

◄ answers in the Rare canteen where a subsidised menu is provided to make up for a dismal lack of local lunchtime eateries. **Edge** is impressed by the quality of the food and also the impassioned enthusiasm of its staff. *Blast Corps* designer **Martin Wakeley** singles out the company's global vision as a major factor: 'With most UK developers you're looking to create games for a section of the UK market, so in terms of quantity of games that you're going to produce it's going to be very small. Something I'd never even considered until I came here was the fact that there's a market that's ten or 20 times greater than the UK market in Japan and America and you can produce quality and open yourself up to a much bigger audience.'

Designing for this global market has its price, though, and in Rare's case it's an enormous investment in its staff in the form of one of the biggest Silicon Graphics networks in the country. **Edge** can't help noticing that while wandering around and meeting team members from various projects, everyone seems to have an SGI workstation on their desks. And if any of the team members require a new piece of software (each often costing upwards of several grand) all they have to do is ask – budgets, it seems, aren't really a factor here.

'You do tend to forget on a day-to-day basis exactly how large-scale this is,' adds Wakeley. 'And then you have a conversation with Howard Lincoln and you realise you are actually a core part of their marketing campaign and NOA's whole structure. They rely on you as much as you rely on them.'

Edge checks for someone holding answer cards up behind but it seems these feelings are shared throughout the company. The royalties that pay for the brand new cars in the car park are the visible proof that its a philosophy that works, too.

The company's new premises it plans to move into in August next year will hopefully afford it greater creative freedom

After *Diddy Kong Racing* (above) Rare's next releases are *Conker's Quest* (top) and *Banjo-Kazooie* (left)

Even spending just a short amount of time at Rare reveals that much of its working practices can be traced back to its relationship with Nintendo in the US, and perhaps more significantly in Japan. Some of its staff have recently come back from the East after being invited out by Nintendo's Kyoto division where it was asked to look at the latest

'You tend to forget on a day-to-day basis how large-scale this is... They [NOA] rely on you as much as you on them'

projects and to discuss its approach to N64 development. Rare is the only company in the world that gets this kind of treatment. 'To be fair,' concludes Wakeley, 'the only real developers of our size in the world are NCL. They have the same sort of problems we have – they're in a very similar situation to us. We can learn a quite a lot from them and they also learn a lot from us as well.'

One thing it could have learned from the Japanese R&D division is that it is going to need to expand. **Edge** is shown a design plan for the brand new offices that it is set to move into next August. The buildings are located just down the road from the farmhouse in 90 acres of parkland. It's an idyllic setting and one which its directors hope will give its designers more creative freedom – and just possibly the opportunity to embark on slightly more off-the-wall projects.

As **Edge** finishes the last of its interviews, many of the staff are now huddled in groups in front of

large TVs running multiplayer *GoldenEye* – an experience that has manifested itself in the daily routine at Rare: many finish their dinner quickly just so they can play for as long as possible. Aside from the glowing reviews it's the most impressive endorsement of one of its own games that a company could hope for. Even the legendary experience that is deathmatch *Quake* doesn't get a look-in.

As **Edge** wraps up its final interview Rare's car park erupts into the equivalent of a race track starting grid. It's Tuesday evening and the company's weekly five-a-side match beckons as eager game designers begin to rev out of the main drive in a 16 valve-charged convoy. For some, of course, it's just a brief respite and they probably won't be heading home until closer to midnight. But working at Rare is more than just a job. And perhaps that, more than anything, *is* the secret. **E**

1994	1995	1996	1997	1997
Rare's big breakthrough – in technical and brand terms – was SNES *Donkey Kong Country*	The SNES conversion of *Killer Instinct* consolidated Rare's mastery of the 16bit format	Rare's first original title for the N64, *Blast Corps*, demonstrated innovative gameplay structure	Perhaps the company's best game to date, *GoldenEye* reinvents the firstperson genre	Rare shows it has established strong characters of its own with *Diddy Kong Racing*

STAMPING THEIR MARK

In their first in-depth interview for many years, Rare's founders, brothers Chris and Tim Stamper, share their views with Edge

Edge: Let's start with this: why has Rare been so secretive over the years?

Tim Stamper: I guess we're not here for personal publicity, we're here for publicity for the company; rather than seeing an interview with a picture of somebody and a picture of the game, we're here to promote and push the videogame as far as we can.

Chris Stamper: I think another reason, as well, is that there just aren't enough hours in the day. We're still working ridiculous hours, seven days in the week, and I'd much rather focus on the games we're working on than spend time promoting ourselves. We've always taken that sort of approach.

TS: We get people writing to us to do conferences and things like that and if we did all the conferences and all of the speeches I just don't know what we'd tell all these people, you know: 'write good videogames, see you'. [Laughs]

CS: There's always something to do on the latest games that we're working on; there's always some detail that we need to look at, to review, and when you're happy with one part, you just move on to the weren't publicising ourselves to a great degree. Our objective has always been quality first – that is number one – and I think that we show them these are the sort of games that we can write and that we want to produce and that is foremost in everything we're trying to achieve. I think there's a natural sort of synergy between us [and] I think it works extremely well in the present day: they don't get involved with us at all. I mean, we decide what games we're going to write, we decide exactly what we're going to do. They just expect us to produce great games, and that's exactly what we're here for.

Edge: In terms of keeping everything under wraps on a company-wide scale, how do you implement that?

CS: We started off obviously as a very small company, we've been growing steadily, we've had our growing pains, but what we try and do is keep the teams in terms of one team working on a project and provide that team with everything they need so that they kind of feel that they are a small company under a larger umbrella, and we try to provide everything that that smaller group actually needs to produce the

Managing director **Tim Stamper** (left) and brother **Chris**, technical director

'I'd much rather focus on the games we're working on than spend time promoting ourselves. We've always taken that approach...'

next, so it never ends, and I'm much happier getting involved with the games than with anything else.

Edge: Was it the same when you were Ultimate?

CS: Even more so, because there were so few people there that we did everything and there just wasn't any time at all. We were distributing and packing the games in boxes, the whole thing. It was just one big rush in total, there was no time to do anything else.

Edge: Do you think that this facet of Rare's character create a natural synergy when you started working with Nintendo?

CS: I think Nintendo were very comfortable with us because we game. So I think it works within itself – the team, as I say, have everything that they need and they can go ahead and produce, hopefully, a great game. And there is some sort of competitive element between the teams but my job and Tim's job is to make sure that the resources of the company are spread evenly and that advances in one group can be shared with the others.

TS: I think that the competition we have is fairly healthy. Each team creates its own engine for its game, but there's a company camaraderie that when the game is finished there are all of these resources available to the other groups. But usually then the team gets back down and starts focusing on its new game so that one game will reach there and another game starting will start from this as a springboard and they'll look at that and how they can elevate themselves to a new position.

CS: It works reasonably well. I mean, if you think of a group like *DK Racing*, the whole group has a vested interest in that product, so they're the last people that are going to be divulging anything about it and so it's very, very tight. They'll only want the very best for their product, and the other groups know roughly what the product is but they don't have an in-depth understanding, and we like to keep it like that because at some stage in the development of each game we like to call on members of the other teams and say 'Look, we've got to this level now, and we think we've got something very special, can we get some of your guys in, we're not going to tell you anything about it; would you like to play it?' and just see what sort of reactions we get. I think there's another issue as well as in terms of we've often worked on projects that at some stage, when we have an engine going and we can see what sort of game we have, that isn't a guarantee that it's going to go ahead. There have been quite a few games that we've worked on that we said 'That's just not going to make it', and we axed it there.

TS: That could have been nine months of development when the game is suddenly axed and the public would never see it and that's a difficult situation for a thirdparty company to be in which has a deadline to reach, which is paid to produce a product, they're almost pushed down the road and must finish this game, whereas I think that we have a little bit of leeway and flexibility that if a game's not going right we can axe it and we can start again and regroup. I just think it makes for a better game for the marketplace and if shots were

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released before that game came out you might get a different impression of what was intended to be released.

THE NINTENDO CONNECTION

Edge: You mentioned Nintendo's marketing teams not being involved with your products – does that mean that only people such as Hiroshi Yamauchi, Shigeru Miyamoto, and Howard Lincoln are given access to that information?

CS: They don't really know the games that we're working on, we decide at Rare all of the games that we're going to write and then they will be the first people that will actually see the game in progress but the design and the initial decision to go ahead with that game happens here.

Edge: That's interesting considering the general perception tends to be that Rare and Nintendo work hand-in-hand, certainly with some of the bigger and more recent releases. Isn't that the case?

CS: No. They obviously would indicate, you know, they'd say 'We'd

love this type of game' or whatever, and we would certainly listen, but we pretty much decide what it is we want to produce.

Edge: So wasn't it difficult dealing with a Nintendo property like *Donkey Kong*?

rated. Films have to go across the board to be very, very successful and we're here to write a successful product and not target a core or specific audience. There are a lot of games now that are dark and depressing and kids don't want to play those. And all of these companies out there producing these types of games, maybe they're writing games for themselves and not for the audience.

Edge: Do you not feel like writing a game for yourselves, occasionally?

CS: I love the games that as you say are Nintendo-style games. *DK Racing* for me, that sort of style would never stop me from playing that game – I think it will have appeal across the generations, and I think that's great. I don't want to play these games which are targeted or skewed for the higher age groups, I want to play something that's fun.

Edge: So how do you feel about the graphical content in *GoldenEye*?

CS: I thought that was great. I think that it's excellent that Rare is in a position now to allow its teams to look at that style of product. I wish somehow we could get that sort of gameplay and skew it slightly younger as well, because I still think that those people that are interested in gameplay itself would play the game regardless of whether it looks slightly cuter. But, yeah, I think it's a wonderful game, I think it does show the sort of things that Rare is capable of.

Edge: Were you not worried about Nintendo's reaction to the violence

sure they'll come up with something very exciting for the future.

Edge: Which of Rare's N64 titles do you think is the best to date?

CS: They all have their merits, I'm very proud of the N64 games we've made. I think Bond is a wonderful game and *DK Racing* is as well – they're just excellent games. They're certainly in my collection.

Edge: You mentioned Rare is autonomous when it comes to a game's contents, but do you have much communication with Nintendo in Japan?

TS: Yeah, we occasionally visit them.

CS: But we don't have any input as such into their games. When we visit them they show us what they're working and when they visit us we show them what we're working on.

Edge: You seem to share a similar design philosophy...

TS: I think we've been working with them for so long, we've been working with them for 12 years, 13 years – it's a long time. And our sort of target audience is the same as theirs. We want games to do well in Japan and America and it wants to be basically the same game, and it's taken a long time and a lot of hard work to achieve that.

A ONE FORMAT COMPANY

Edge: At the moment, Rare must be one of the few developers in the world that isn't working on the PC. Why is that?

CS: I'm very, very comfortable working on the N64. I see the PC as something of a nightmare in terms

'You have to remember there was nothing available on *Donkey Kong* before we actually took it on board... just this small sprite'

CS: It was, but you have to remember there was nothing available on *Donkey Kong* before we actually took it on board – it didn't have anything, it had not been developed, it was just this small sprite from this arcade game from way back. When you say 'Donkey Kong' now you don't think of the old game, you think of the new game.

Edge: How do you feel about the child-oriented nature of most of Nintendo's games? *GoldenEye* seems to fly right in the face of that – was that deliberate?

TS: I think that if you look at successful films, there aren't that many successful films that aren't PG

in *GoldenEye*?

TS: Yes, we were very worried. [Laughs]

CS: But you must remember that it is a known quantity, it is understood: Bond is licensed to kill.

TS: And not licensed to limp. [Laughs] I mean, the character wasn't created by us, we were just producing the game around the movie and I think the job that was done was tremendous.

Edge: Will there be a sequel?

TS: Yes, the Bond team are working on another game.

CS: And at the moment they're working to make some significant improvements to the engine so I'm

of trying to produce games for that platform. For myself, involved with the technical side, the N64 is a wonderful machine to work on...

TS: That doesn't mean to say we don't play PC games; we do.

CS: [Laughs] That's true, but the thing I like about the N64, and I don't think many people realise, is that because it's a cartridge based machine, although some people see that as a disadvantage, each time you add a larger cartridge to the N64, you're changing the whole machine itself, it becomes more powerful. As time progresses, the N64 is becoming a more capable machine. The PlayStation is pretty

much fixed in what it is but the N64 has a capability that's expanding, so I think you're going to see that the N64 games are going to continue to improve and grow and it's going to be not only the evolution in the techniques that we have but because of cartridges getting larger and because you can dynamically download so much information from the cartridge, it's like just having a bigger machine with more memory. So it's a wonderful machine to actually work on and I think that the future of the N64 is quite interesting.

Edge: But surely it can't be a question of power as a top-end PC with a decent card is arguably more powerful than an N64.

CS: It probably is, but I don't think there are that many of those configurations in a sense. We're much happier producing on a standard format which we know exists and is designed for actually playing games.

Edge: The PlayStation seems like an easy platform to port games to from the PC – would you say the N64 would be harder to develop in tandem with the PC?

CS: I think if you're going to develop with your eye on porting it to another platform, I think you're going to make compromises right from the start, and we don't have to do that. We just look at the N64 and say 'Okay, what's the best possible game that we can produce on that?', with no thoughts of how we might convert that, and I think that's important. And I think also, which is something we touched on before, we want to be in a position where we can throw enough resources at developing a game and then feel

comfortable that we can get that return back to carry on the process. I don't think we could that on the PC and I don't think we could do that on the PlayStation. I think it's too confused a market.

RARE'S COMING OF AGE
Edge: Have these resources come solely from the Nintendo deal?
TS: I think it was the process of going through all the types of products that other companies have to go through – conversions, thirdparty work – to reach the point that we've managed to reach that we had to take on because the company needed to survive, before it could reach a stage where it could produce its own dream products.
Edge: But do you think it would be fair to say that nobody else could have made *Donkey Kong Country* at the time it was produced?
CS: I think that's probably very, very true. I think that you have to have the resources and you have to have the confidence.
TS: We had a meeting about this list of equipment that was required to write *Donkey Kong Country* and it was colossal, and I guess that was a turning point in the company's life. The safe way would have been to have said 'No, we will not buy that equipment yet, we'll wait until the price comes down' and somebody else would have got it, I'm sure. But it was a big decision, a big decision for the company. If it had gone wrong, it probably would have broken us.
Edge: So was it a case of getting out the calculator and working out how much rendering was required?
CS: Yes, we worked out how much the SG equipment and all of the licences for the seats would cost us. It was a lot of money, a big investment for that type of game.
Edge: Presumably the profits more than balanced the books?
CS: Well, yes, I think it's in 'The Guinness Book of Records'. It's just a phenomenal seller.
Edge: Which game are you proudest of, or have the fondest memories of?
TS: The ones we haven't written yet. [Laughs]
CS: We have fond memories of a lot of games – they all have meanings for certain reasons. Obviously *DK Country* is a wonderful game and we have some wonderful memories of.

At the moment I think *DK Racing* is a wonderful product, it's something we're very, very proud of – Bond as well. As Tim said it's the later games that we're really interested in and the ones that we're working on now that we find even more exciting.

THE IMPORTANCE OF SIZE
Edge: Do you agree with the school of thought that states that there is no longer room in this market for small developers starting out – that they'd find it too difficult to compete?
CS: It's a problem for sure, there's no question about it, but what's interesting is that now that we are a publisher we are being contacted by small developers, and our philosophy has always been 'what does it take to produce a number one best-selling game?', and we're not going to be saying to people 'Can you produce a game for this deadline or for this much money?'. So I think there are opportunities for those small developers but it does need to be with someone who has the resources to actually make it all

happen. The equipment you need, the time you need – it's a big, significant undertaking.
Edge: Presumably there's no way a small outfit with ten staff could try and take on a game like *Conker's Quest* – it would have to design a game that would reflect its means?
CS: I think that it's very difficult. I think realistically you need to look at a two-year window to produce something very, very special. Really, you probably need more than ten people to do that and if you want to look at what it's going to cost for 15 or 20 people for two years...
TS: But every game doesn't have to be like a *Conker's Quest*. *Tetris* wouldn't take ten people two years to produce. I think if any of the small development companies have a great idea that they're confident they can pull off and it can work if they had the resources, they should contact a bigger software company and see if they can get some sponsorship or some assistance.
CS: Yeah, I think it's about getting the deal, it's exactly what we did.

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◄ I think there are steps that you have to take if you think you're going to jump right to the top on the very first game – it's just going to be so difficult to do. There's nothing wrong with moving one step at a time, and that's exactly what we did: we paid our dues by producing a lot of conversions in the early days.

Edge: What do you think of the general quality of software today?

TS: Working in the software industry it's always great to see other companies producing number one games or games that are really, really good because I think it perpetuates the industry. We're all gameplayers here, we love to play other people's great games and it is disappointing when you go out onto the streets and take your hard-earned money and you buy a game

we possibly could because these young kids are going to spend their money on it, so I think that's really important and maybe if other companies had that kind of concept rather than just putting a game out because of getting pushed by the deadline, there'd be more high-quality software.

THE POWER OF PLAYSTATION

Edge: The PlayStation seems to be dominating the market at the moment in terms of sales, installed user base and developer support. What do you make of that?

TS: Well, I think, with regard to developer support, Sony have made it really easy for a smaller developer to jump online with their system and produce a game that is going to be sold. I don't know how many

ultimate game is one that would always manage to change itself and you would never get bored with it, like golf, which lots of people get stuck in and get addicted, and it varies every time they play it. Sure, they change the courses, but it's always the same game, and I wonder one day if a videogame would ever reach that sort of status – that would be a game that would be great to write. And I'd rather see one single high-quality game rather than ten low-quality games.

CS: I think Sony has a wonderful brand name and they have a very good machine but at the end of the day I think that if it's quality that you're looking for, I think that you have to pick the N64. And if you're looking for a machine whose game quality will continue to improve, the

'I would look at the two systems and say that the PlayStation is on a downward market spiral and the N64 is on an upward spiral'

that looks good and you're unhappy with it. And it's kind of part of our idea – traditionally our audience is younger than the PlayStation audience, which is 21, our core audience is probably the 12 year old – they've haven't got a lot of disposable income and it's very, very important that when they buy a game that it's good, and I like to think that we did everything we could to make that game as good as

they're selling, but I gather it's not very many units, especially with a company that is not fully funded. It's far more difficult with Nintendo so I think Sony can proliferate with its number of titles.
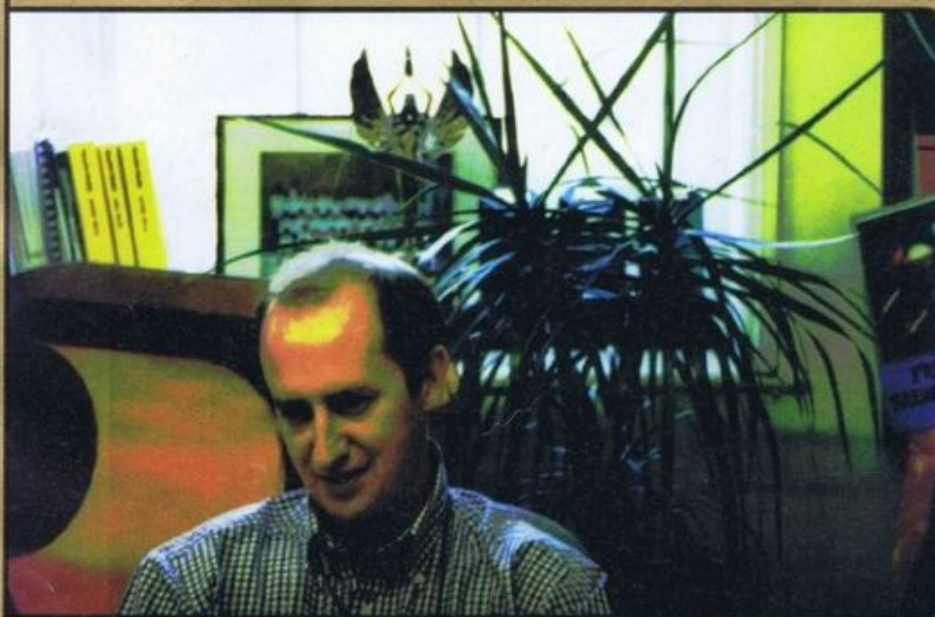
Edge: Do you think Nintendo has it right in terms of number of titles out there? If you had the choice, would you prefer to produce more?

TS: I'd sooner do fewer titles that were of higher quality. I guess the

N64 is the only candidate.

Edge: But if you're making games for experienced gamers, how are you going to open up this market to the true mass market?

CS: The experienced gameplayer will have the opportunity to experience the whole game as it was intended. Our games are designed so that the novice player will still get a great deal of enjoyment. A novice player can pick up something like *DK*

Racing and can begin to win the balloons and open up more tracks and just have a great time on that. The experienced gameplayers can really start to look and go through the whole two adventures, so that's what we try and design internally.

Edge: Do you not feel there's a risk of alienating the average gamer with something as initially daunting as *GoldenEye*? Somehow, it's easier to imagine a parent getting to grips with *Ridge Racer*, for example.

CS: I think it's down to trying it and experiencing it. I noticed that the rental figures for Bond in the States are astronomical, and it's beating everything else by maybe three to one. So there are a lot of people out there that are trying it saying 'Hang on, there's something really interesting in here'.

Edge: What do you think about the danger of potentially overcrowding the market with low-quality games?

CS: If there is an overcrowding, there are too many games, there's confusion, there's a tendency to reduce the price of games because of that. Then how are developers going to generate enough resources to actually produce a triple-A product? It's not going to happen.

TS: It's kind of getting like the old budget market in the UK in the '80s, when there was a rush of substandard software.

CS: I would look at the two systems and say that the PlayStation is on a downward market spiral and the N64 is on an upward market spiral.

Edge: Do you not think that if we're heading for a crash similar to the end of the 16bit market, the N64 would be dragged along whether or not it played a major part in the affair? In other words, won't the

whole videogame industry suffer?

CS: I think we're all aware that it is a fashion business, and I think that we have to be ready for the lean times and that's one of the wonderful things about Rare. We're working hard to maintain Rare's position in the marketplace. The PlayStation developers I've spoken to lead a pretty hand-to-mouth existence; when the market changes they're going to be in trouble.

TS: And it is an entertainment industry, and people are getting more and more spare time and they want to be entertained, so the industry isn't going to be here today and gone tomorrow. I've heard people speculate about this for 15 years, and it's still here and we're still here producing games.

Edge: Do you think that games are getting better, generally?

TS: Yes, but talking about the mass of PlayStation games, I mean, we're in the industry and I couldn't to tell you what all the PlayStation games are like. If you gave me a list of the 300 or so titles released by this Christmas, I just wouldn't know what they're like. And how anybody else – a mother, a father, or brother or somebody who's got a machine – is going to know which game to buy unless they're specifically told is beyond me.

Edge: This is probably why we are seeing an increase in the number of big licences again, which is a side of the industry that is unfortunate...

CS: We were concerned about taking on the Bond licence but I think because of our reputation we had a lot more flexibility than any other company would have had and we were able to produce something very special.

VIDEOGAME VIOLENCE

Edge: With regard to *GoldenEye*, which obviously contains blood and the shooting of human opponents, what are your thoughts on violence in videogames?

CS: Well, as I said, we felt reasonably comfortable with *GoldenEye* as it's in a known context so you know it's a military style game, therefore there's an implicit understanding that there is violence associated with it. If you buy some other game and then you get innocent civilians being shot in the streets – that I have a problem with. So I didn't have as much problem with Bond because it's a given. But the mainstream effort for Rare's games is to produce games which don't rely on violence. After a while, I think, when you're playing these games you don't notice whether it's violent or not. You may find it entertaining for the first few minutes and then you forget about it and what you're interested in is the gameplay. And you don't need the blood and you don't need other things like that. I think that the context is very important and I think that having a rating is very important.

Edge: We're now at this hazy stage where in-game animation has advanced to the point where it is convincingly realistic, and within five years it will surely be possible to show truly gruesome levels of detail to the player.

TS: But why would you want to show that? If you want to see that then buy a video. I don't think it adds any gameplay and it's probably not a road that we want to go down. It's just pointless to appeal to that end of the audience like that.

CS: Yes, I think that's a very short-lived road to take, and I think there's far more mileage in producing games that don't rely on violence for entertainment. It will keep resurfacing, and I think it does need to be addressed and I think that the content does need to be indicated on the packaging.

TS: I think the violence thing is also escalating with the age of the players as well. A 20 year old expects there to be violence in games and a 12 year old doesn't.

THE FUTURE

Edge: Where do you think you're gong to be in five years' time – do
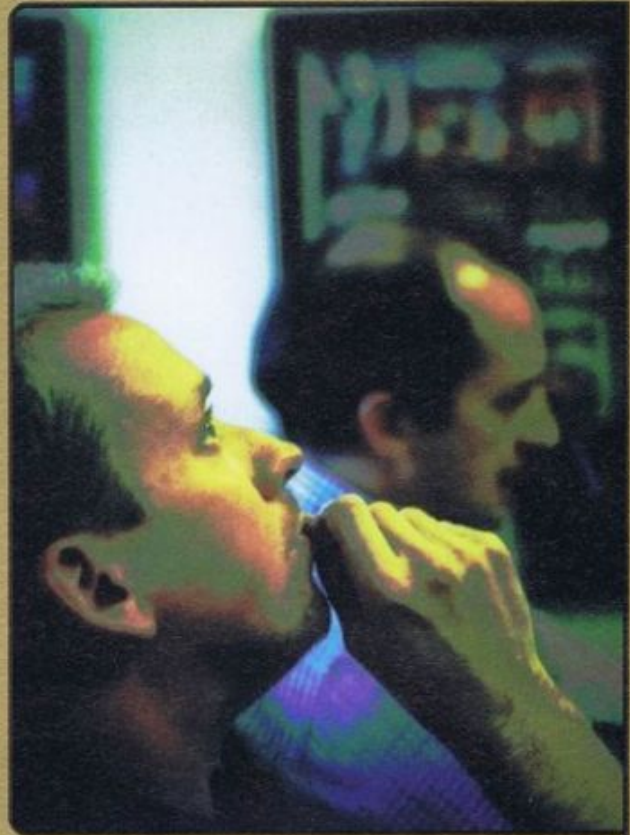
you think you'll be developing videogames or do you have ambitions to do something else?

CS: No, I think that we'll still be around. Our plan is to actively encourage the new generation of designers and engineers within the company. I think myself and Tim are now taking a more overseeing sort of role and I see that continuing. We've got so many great people coming through that already it's more their sort of games that are being produced. I still think we'd be pretty much the same thing.

Edge: There is currently a lot of interest in online games; many are suggesting that it represents the future. What are your thoughts?

TS: I'll handle this one. [Laughs] I was asked the same question in Japan. I'm not a big fan of network gaming. I think if you have to go and play a game over a network it shows that the AI in the game is not good enough. I think that probably the best gaming experience we get is when you get a network machine connected to someone you know. In

a company building you've got a network and you can play PCs across the network and get four machines connected together and people fighting in groups, and it's really, really good fun. Now, why you would want to play anybody that you don't even know is completely beyond me. In a network game, somebody beats you or you beat them and you can go round and make fun of them and say 'Well, you didn't do very well, I kicked your butt – try me next time', it's just part of the whole social thing. But to play somebody you don't know is just such a bizarre concept... I just find it very alien.

CS: For me, multiplayer games are about four people using one console, with one screen.

TS: But you have to know the people you're playing with. It's like in an arcade, with a two, three, or fourplayer game – if there are people on there you don't know, people don't generally want to play, especially if they're bigger than you and you beat them.

THE GOLDEN TOUCH

Destined for true classic status in years to come, *GoldenEye* is perhaps Rare's most accomplished achievement to date. Edge met with the team responsible and spoke to some of its key members

Perhaps more than any other title, *GoldenEye* is the greatest example of Rare's creative and technical expertise, having pushed back the boundaries of the videogame. It's a title that seems to have captured the essence of 64bit gaming with unbridled sophistication, shunning the bright and breezy attitude of most N64 titles in favour an altogether more mature theme. In short, it's a modern classic. Perhaps most surprisingly, it was created in the most part by individuals who hadn't worked in videogames development before.

Edge met the team behind the project and spoke to three of its key members – Martin Hollis (game director/programmer), Dave Doak (software engineer/designer), and Karl Hilton (3D artist).

Edge: So, apart from the film (obviously), what were the main influences for *GoldenEye*?
Martin Hollis: We couldn't pretend we didn't play *Doom* a lot.
Karl Hilton: And *Virtua Cop* as

well. It was pegged as being a *Doom* and *Virtua Cop* synthesis at the beginning.
Edge: And when exactly did the work on the project begin?
Dave Doak: Two and a half years ago. Well, no, probably getting towards three years ago now – it was January 1995. It was when we were first getting the emulators for the N64 chipset. I remember we didn't actually have the actual hardware at the time.
DD: There was all the pain of changing over to new hardware.
MH: It was just an enormous amount of trouble because we didn't have the final hardware and we were using Onyx emulators; we didn't get much mileage out of them at all. Then we received an early build of the actual N64 hardware and we realised that it was quite different – it wasn't an emulator any more, it was some approximation of an N64.
Edge: How long was it before you got the game engine running?
MH: Probably about a year. It was a very long time because I

remember in '95 there wasn't much of a game.
Edge: It was first shown at Shoshinkai on video, wasn't it?
KH: There was no gun on screen, no deaths, you got to travel around the archives and that was about it.

CONTROLLING JAMES BOND
Edge: What do you think separates *GoldenEye* from most firstperson PC games?
MH: I guess the major difference is with the control system. It's a fairly obvious remark, but an analogue controller makes a big difference. The analogue stick is good – it's perfect, I suppose.
Edge: Yes, but it could be argued that using a mouse with a PC offers a similar degree of flexibility.
MH: Yes, that's true, but it's not the same because you keep having to move it back, whereas the N64's stick re-centres.
KH: There's been a lot of stuff on the Net about why we haven't got a jump or why we haven't got a run button. Firstly the analogue's meant to be for running anyway –

if you push forward you are running and if you look at the speed you're going it's actually quite realistic for running. Secondly, there are no more buttons left anyway for a run or a jump so you'd have to start doing strange combinations with things. You'd need a joypad with, say, 14 buttons if you want to get everything that everyone wants in a PC game.
MH: The worst thing about running is that everyone runs the whole time anyway. On *Quake* you've got a configuration that says 'run always'. Well, it's like, what's the point of having walking? It's just completely redundant.
Edge: *GoldenEye* probably exploits the N64 controller to its fullest potential to date. How much thought went into that?
MH: We went through a lot of control systems.
Edge: The default control actually seems the most awkward to get to grips with...
KH: Do you think so? Because I hate the *Turok*-style one. The feedback we've got back off the Net seems split 50/50. There are a lot of kids – most of the feedback is from America because they've

Most of the *GoldenEye* team had no game experience prior to the project

been playing it for quite a while now – and half of them are saying the default setting is the best and the other half prefer the *Turok* one.
MH: We did the *Turok* one last because basically we had a lot of control systems but everyone in testing, everyone in America and everyone at Rare, said 'We think the default one is fine' and most people seemed to be of the opinion we should take all the others out. But there were like two people at Rare that said 'It would be good if it had one like *Turok*' so we said 'Okay, we'll do that'. We put that in last and I'm glad we did. I mean, we were seriously considering having absolutely no selection at all.

DETAIL TO DIE FOR
Edge: What feature in *GoldenEye* are you most proud of?
DD: All the things I did... [Laughs] No, there really are so many different things.
MH: I'd say the overall detail. It's unfair to single out one thing because there are a lot of innovative things: polygonal characters from the film, a

From left: **Dave Doak**, **Karl Hilton** and **Martin Hollis**

animation in other games...
MH: A great deal of effort was put into the motion capture and cleaning it up. It's got some really sophisticated, technical blending and drawing of scenery and stuff –

not even think about whether it was possible to put them on the system – partly borne out of practical considerations because we didn't have any system – but we just carried on blindly and...

cradle – the cradle's just insanity, it's like, why would you want to build something you can see all of at once?
KH It's basically got everything in it that you shouldn't do in a 3D game [laughs], but it was important in the film and we had to have it at the end. It went through two or three stages of modelling before the final version. It got completely changed once and then it got cut down and then cut down again and then cut down again...
Edge: It must have been difficult to keep this level of detail and variety in a 96Mbit cartridge.
MH: It used to be 380Mbits.
Edge: That would be good to play, have you got it here?
MH: Well, it's actually the same – it's just compression, simply very good compression.
KH: That's why the game's turned out well, I think, because we didn't limit ourselves at the start, saying 'Right, you can have 20 textures for this level, and you can have 20 textures for this level and that's it'. We just built the levels and afterwards we're like 'This is a bit expensive, can you cut out a couple of things?' I mean, St Petersburg got quite a lot of textures cut out of it – it was a lot more adventurous than that originally. A couple of the other levels also had to be looked at but

'We only played multiplayer *Quake* for the first time the other day... it seemed good fun but I wouldn't say I was bowled over'

polygonal multiplayer mode, etc.
KH: I do like the shooting of different body parts. Trying to shoot someone in the backside is still one of the best pastimes.
Edge: How much hard work was that – presumably you implemented a lot of motion capture? Was that done in-house?
KH: We had a system set up here.
Edge: Because it seems to be a whole lot more realistic than most

the soft fillets [soft skin] that *Turok 2* is supposed to have are in *GoldenEye*, but we don't think it necessary to make a big song and dance about it. And there are many other things like that that we shan't be mentioning.
DD: One of the things that seems to be enduring about it, as you were saying, is the detail – it's nice to see people who played it and they'll notice something that they hadn't noticed before; that you can actually shoot things – objects around the floor, or something like that – which is something they weren't expecting.
KH: Or watching what the guards are doing when they don't think you're watching them, and they start yawning and swatting at flies. There's a lot of stuff like that.
Edge: The attention to detail is impressive. How much of a part does the hardware play in this?
MH: We set out with an unusual attitude which was simply that we'd just model the graphics and

KH: It was my first game so I didn't know what was required except that we were doing it in polygons. We didn't have a system yet so I just sat down and started evolving the stuff from the films that we knew about and it just developed from there. And I think probably because none of us had done a game before, we didn't worry too much about whether you could do this or not, or whether it had been done – we just thought: that would be a cool idea and that would be a cool idea, and we put it all in and when we finally got the stuff running we could see whether it was going to run or not.
MH: It took a very long time to get the incredibly ambitious models running at a decent speed.
DD: The greatest struggles were driven by the film – if we'd sat down to it without those constraints of working to the film and things, we might have just stuck to building interiors all of the time. Things like the dam and the

very little remodelling was done. Generally most of it went in as it was designed and as it was built. And a lot of it actually got made more expensive because over two years, the first stuff that was done started to look not as good as the later stuff we did, so I went back and redid the early stuff. So it went through several generations.

MULTIPLE BONDING

Edge: How did the fourplayer mode come about? It's more accomplished than that of, say, *Hexen 64*, but was it still added quite late in the day?

MH: I suppose it was, it was probably about March or something when I decided that it would be a very good idea despite all the deadlines. Everyone was saying at that time that it wouldn't be any fun with splitscreen, it wouldn't be any good. And I was kind of listening to those remarks and believing them, but they turned out to be completely false because if you're sitting beside the other three people, you can shout and scream at them – you can see their reaction in a way that you can't when it's on a network. It's a shame you need a big TV to get the most of out of it, though.

KH: We spent many a late evening playtesting the multiplayer mode before it was finished.

DD: Even from the start, I remember the first night when we got it working on fourplayer and it was like running at 8Hz or something, and Bond was running around as if he was on a trolley, and everyone was Bond and it crashed every five seconds.

Edge: Were you not spreading your resources thinner by looking after both the oneplayer and the multiplayer game?

MH: Well, we managed to fit it in. It was Stephen Ellis who had the task of implementing the multiplayer and he did an excellent job. I suppose in a sense the resources were spread thinner, yes, but not much thinner.

Edge: Perhaps the most world-renowned multiplayer game is *Quake* – was that a major influencing factor?

MH: No, not at all.

Dave: In fact we only played multiplayer *Quake* for the first time yesterday.

KH: There's been a lot of discussion on the Net about how multiplayer *Quake* is the best multiplayer thing you can play so we've been trying it out.

Edge: And what did you think of those claims?

MH: It seems fun... but I wouldn't say I was bowled over.

KH: There's nothing original in there but, yes, it seemed good fun.

LIFE AT RARE

Edge: How would you describe Rare if you had to sum it up in one media-friendly soundbite?

DD: It's just lots of people who are mad on games.

MH: Everyone just has an incredible passion for games, and also has the best equipment – exactly what we want, exactly what we need.

KH: We have a great working environment not only in terms of quality of where we are, but quality of the equipment that we use. You get what you need to do the job – it's not a question of 'Oh no, you can't have this software because we can't afford it'. If you need a certain item of software you'll get it, and then you know you can do your job with it. That's probably why we turn out some good quality stuff.

MH: And why so few people leave the company, as well.

KH: I assume a game like *GoldenEye* is a major investment for a company like Rare. There are probably not a lot of companies out there that could put the sort of investment that we put into *GoldenEye*, but Nintendo were happy to let us get the game the way we wanted it. Although we had deadlines to meet, there wasn't the pressure saying 'Right, stop now, let's get it out'. We got it

finished to a degree that we were very happy with.

Edge: It must be the one of the very few film licences that have really done any justice to the source material.

KH: I think we were all quite nervous when we started, when they said, 'Do you want to do James Bond type of game?'

DD: Yes, they're usually the kiss of death, film licences.

KH: It just made us more aware that we'd have to produce something very exceptional to try and break out of that expectation, because we knew it would face that kind of 'Oh, it's a film licence' – so you've got to make sure it is good, then.

MH: It's just a question of aptitude to your work.

Edge: Had you worked at other companies before starting here?

MH: Not in the software industry, no. By and large there are very few people at Rare who've worked at other software companies.

KH: I was fresh out of university, I came from an architectural background. I did a BA in Architecture and spent a lot of time working with CAD systems and thought it was a lot more fun just doing nice graphics than actually designing buildings, so I went and did a computer graphics course in Bournemouth and then I looked around the software companies and Rare were the first to offer me a job. I came here and have had a great time ever since.

MH: Architecture's perfect...

KH: It is, yes. [Laughs] I get to build all the things I've always tried to build and no one complains that it's not plausible. **E**