British Invasion

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By David Rider and Ed Semrad

Just as their musician counterparts have indelibly influenced American music, British developers are revolutionizing gaming here. *EGM* takes a look at the U.K.'s 10 hottest development groups.

DMA DESIGN

ocean

Gremlin INTERACTIVE

CORE™

Codemasters

Traveller's Tales

PSYGNOSIS

RAREWARE™

ELECTRONIC ARTS®

BULLFROG PRODUCTIONS LTD

PlayStation

Dundee

Southport
Manchester
Sheffield

Liverpool

Derby

Warwick

Langley/Reading
Guildford

London

SEGA

ARGONAUT

probe ENTERTAINMENT

Virgin INTERACTIVE entertainment

EIDOS INTERACTIVE

AKKlaim entertainment, inc.

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Probe

Now part of the huge Acclaim group, Probe is still run by co-founder Fergus McGovern. With a pedigree that dates all the way back to 8-Bit consoles, Probe has earned their stripes with a series of movie conversions like Terminator 2 and Aliens 3 on the Genesis. They've embraced the next-gen consoles with ease, bringing the Alien and Die Hard Trilogies to the PlayStation and Extreme G and shortly Forsaken to the N64. Probe have always been at the cutting edge of programming and while they still tackle large licenses, their new freedom within Acclaim is allowing them to explore other coding projects.

Probe hopes that their futuristic racing game Extreme G will be one of Acclaim's flagship titles this winter.

The days of doing conversions of every Acclaim title for every system are over. Fergus McGovern now picks his titles very carefully and then makes sure that there is enough time, manpower and money available to produce only AAA-rated titles. Such is the case for Forsaken and Constructor, both of which have been in the development phase for some time. Fergus sums it up when he states: "We're a lot more flexible now and a title isn't finished until it's perfect. In the end it's how the game plays and not that it made it's deadline."

L ast year in Britain, the buzz was for Britpop, which saw bands like Radiohead, Oasis, Blur, The Prodigy and the like storm up the record charts here in America and in Europe. This year, the buzz is over Britsoft, the new wave of software that's knocking the spots off games from America and even Japan.

Britain has always had a fine tradition of games programming. In fact, some of the earliest and best-loved PC games were dreamt up in the fevered minds of English kids sitting in bedrooms, bashing away on ancient Amigas—and this trend continues on a console near you.

Need an example? Just as Sega has AM2, Nintendo has a building full of top-notch coders, Sony has access not only to their own team of in-house programmers in London, they also have a direct line into Psygnosis, arguably the one company who was the first to show exactly how cool the PlayStation could be (do Destruction Derby and WipeOut ring a bell?).

And the business of game development in the U.K. has gone ballistic, with people defecting from companies to set up their own, some of them backed by the big publishers (witness Eighth Wonder, the guys who jumped the Nintendo 64 ship at Rare to set up their own firm with Sony's blessing).

Want proof that the Brits know their stuff when it comes to making games? OK, think back to your 16-Bit console. Right, what was your favorite game? Star Fox on the Super NES? Ah, that'll be Jez San and the guys at Argonaut Software in London, then. Alien 3 on the Genesis? OK, that was Probe Entertainment, located just outside London in commuter belt Croydon. Now you're getting the picture.

Of course, not all British software is for everybody. It has gone from being weird and only playable in the U.K. (those soccer management games really don't translate to big sales in the U.S.) to being so far out on the cutting edge, it's liable to slice itself.

But there are dozens of reasons why this should be so. Top of the list has to be that traditionally, British games players started off their hobby on rickety old BBC PCs, Spectrums and Amigas, machines that were relatively easy to code for. That meant a generation of British kids who grew up trying their hands at programming in machine code long before anyone had thought to write a book called *How To Program Video Games In C++* and when a "top-of-the-range computer" was the latest piece of equipment from Commodore. And forget consoles: Remember, we're talking about a time when the Atari VCS was king. Added to that fact was that, as well as being best-sellers in the U.K. and Europe, machines like the Commodore 64 pushed programmers to their very limit, thanks to limited memory and antiquated storage devices like cassette tape drives. If you wanted to code a game on a C64 or an Amiga, you had to master every nuance of your respective machine's language, and some British coders

Codemasters

Founded and run by Richard and David Darling, Codemasters began its life in 1986 and has constantly come up with surprises, from winning a massive lawsuit over the Game Genie in the early '90s to expanding their highly successful Micro Machines series on the PlayStation, the company has become one of the most respected in the business, thanks to its insistence that gameplay should never take a back seat to graphics.

Continuing their best-known series of Micro Machines games, Codemasters' latest update moves up to the 32-Bit platforms.

Rare

Set up by another team of brothers—Tim and Chris Stamper—Rare was previously known as "Ultimate" back in the NES and Master System days. Now one of Nintendo's most trusted and reliable developers, the company has a string of hits such as Donkey Kong Country on the Super NES and GoldenEye on the N64 to their name, with titles like Diddy Kong Country and Banjo-Kazooie waiting to take the N64 by storm.

When you work for Nintendo you get to do your programming in absolute secrecy. At E³ Nintendo unveiled both Banjo-Kazooie and Conker's Quest for the first time to the amazement and praises from everybody who got to play the games.

Just when we thought we had seen everything Rare was working on, Nintendo unleashes screens of Diddy Kong Racing. Not just a Mario Kart remake, Diddy promises to be all that and much, much more.

thrived on the challenge, learning everything they could about their chosen hardware so that they could squeeze every last pixel out of it.

This attitude continues even today. And if any evidence is needed, just think back to Donkey Kong Country on the Super NES. The machine was entering its twilight zone, with the games press raving about upcoming new hardware from Sony, Sega and the Big N themselves, yet Rare—yes, a British software company—created a space at the head of Nintendo's table by doing things on the Super NES that nobody else had thought possible. It may have taken a few years, but in the end, a British company pushed the Super NES to heights that even Nintendo hadn't taken it. That fact wasn't lost on the big N, and last year, they took a 25 percent stake in the U.K. coders, hoping—and rightly so—that anyone who could do that to the Super NES could do even better on the N64. Now with Blast Corps and GoldenEye already on the shelves and Diddy Kong Racing, Conker's Quest and Banjo-Kazooie on the way, Nintendo's faith in Rare is justified.

But Rare wasn't the first British company to make Nintendo drop their Game Boys and take notice. That honor goes to Jez San and Argonaut, the people who not only brought you Star Fox, but also created the technology—the Super FX chip—that made it work. And once again, Nintendo hasn't forgotten how valuable the British company is, since Argonaut has two N64 games slated for release next year.

The abundance of top-notch British developers has made more than just Nintendo scout for talent in the U.K. Based in Dundee, Scotland, DMA—the original creators of Lemmings—has just been taken over by U.K.-based publishers and developers Gremlin. Cambridge-based outfit Millennium was acquired by Sony, so it'll be interesting to see how they fare on the 32-Bit platform, given their graphics expertise. The recent Electronic Arts acquisition of Bullfrog was the brainchild of Peter Molyneux who earlier this summer left the company he created to start LionHead.

The recent merger between British publisher

and developer Ocean and French code house Infogrames has already borne fruit for the U.K. outfit. Infogrames' V Rally stormed to the top of the sales charts in Europe, thanks to its mix of incredible speed, minimal polygon pop-up and gripping race action. The merger hasn't been without casualties however, with Ocean reducing the size of its in-house code team known as Tribe considerably. To counter this, they have formed an alliance with relative new boys, Red Lemon, a codeshop based in Glasgow, Scotland. Their first title will be an air combat game for the N64, a sort of PilotWings-with-attitude, and so far, it's looking good.

So it seems as if British software is so good, that European, Japanese and U.S. firms can't wait to buy into it. But why? There aren't many people better placed to answer that question than Argonaut's Jez San, so that's exactly what we did. We wanted to know if he was surprised at the amount of interest being shown in U.K.-sourced games. "No...us Brits have always arrogantly believed that we do more than our fair

DMA Designs

Originators of the Lemmings series and long-time Psygnosis ally, DMA were recently bought by Gremlin. Run by David Jones and based in Dundee, Scotland, the company quickly become a member of Nintendo's Dream Team and will shortly see Body Harvest published by Nintendo. In the U.K. and Europe, BMG will release Grand Theft Auto on the PlayStation. After that, titles will be released via Gremlin.

DMA Designs' days with Psygnosis may be over, but their knack for designing unusual games is as full-blown as ever.

Grand Theft Auto's more than 200 missions have you hauling drugs, busting through police road blocks and, of course, stealing cars to become the most-wanted driver in America. What? You expected something normal from the creators of Lemmings?

Core

Managing Director Jeremy Smith must be amazed at the way his company has suddenly leapt to the forefront of the industry. Best known for their work on Mega-CD games, one PlayStation release changed their fortunes and put publisher Eidos (who bought them in 1996) on the map for good. The game, of course, was Tomb Raider. The sequel can't fail, and with titles like Fighting Force and Ninja backing it up, Core Design looks certain to continue their success on 32-Bit systems.
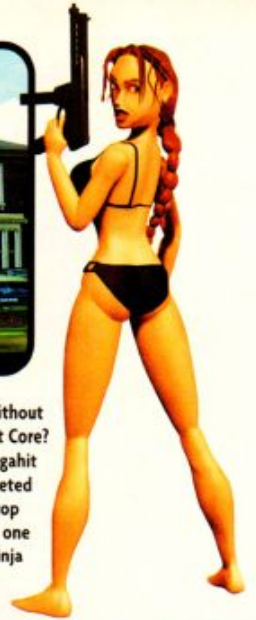
Where would Eidos be without the development team at Core? Without a doubt, the megahit Tomb Raider has skyrocketed Eidos from obscurity to top 10 developer in less than one year and with Tomb 2, Ninja and more soon to come, Eidos can do no wrong.

share of the world's best games!" San said.

San agrees that there are often obvious differences in the way U.S. and British games look and play. "U.S. games are often laced with long FMV sequences," he said. "The U.S. games are quite often financed by movie or TV production companies who try to pretend that the game medium is closer to linear film and TV media than it really is. Of course, there are notable exceptions, and don't get me wrong; there are some excellent U.S. games companies. But there are also some over-hyped ones. British companies tend to be stronger on the technical elements (like 3-D graphics), and Americans tend to be stronger on the front-end visuals. Both country's developers are good at the creative elements involved in game and character design."

Psygnosis PR Manager Mark Day (one of Scotland's most successful exports who went from Psygnosis' Liverpool headquarters to their offices in California) agrees, but he has a slightly different take on the situation.

"There are cultural differences both in terms of living in the U.K. and in terms of how the games company functions," Day explains. "U.K. companies are a little less 'corporate'; they may be willing to give developers a little more creative license, and good talent will always take advantage of that. As for living in the U.K., British people have easy access to a lot of U.S. culture—TV, movies and music—while the opposite isn't always true. So the U.K. has the best of both worlds. A game like G Police is heavily influenced by Hollywood action movies—the explosions, the dynamics, the energy—but it's created by British developers who can also bring their British coding experience into the mix."

Perhaps one thing that has surprised a lot of publishers and developers alike in both the U.S. and Japan is the speed with which British coders have learned to maximize the new 32- and 64-Bit platforms. While there are still developers out there who promise the Earth with fancy CGI screen shots and completed games that don't actually deliver the goods, there can be little doubt that British developers have been among

the first to really understand the inner workings of the next-generation consoles.

"British developers are technically very good at getting their grip on new machines," San said. "They're ambitious and hungry for new challenges and are quick off the mark at mastering the learning curve of next-generation consoles."

San believes the dominance shown by U.K. developers on the new consoles is down to certain key skills: "3-D and technology are key factors. The U.K. has always been a hotbed for those two assets, as well as a strong 'assembler' programming mentality have helped to keep success in the next-generation console space."

From the Psygnosis camp, Mark Day is particularly happy with the way his company has attacked the PlayStation. "I think the results speak for themselves," he said. "This year we're particularly proud of Colony Wars for finally nailing the space combat genre on console. It's been attempted plenty of times before, but no one's ever quite mastered the feel of dogfighting in

Bullfrog

Originally set up in 1987 by coding legend Peter Molyneux, Bullfrog quickly earned an enormous reputation for their god games. Molyneux left the company (now under the wing of Electronic Arts), once work on his last baby, Dungeon Keeper, was completed, but his new company, LionHead Studios, will release its first game in 1999.
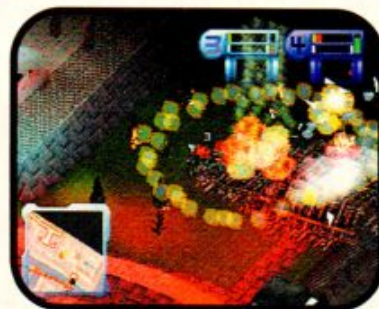
Bullfrog's reputation for making revolutionary games is well known in the industry and dates back to the 1980s. That is probably why Electronic Arts quickly took them under their wing to produce the sim-type games for the video game consoles. Sim Hospital and Dungeon Keeper were the latest games that EA was showing at ECTS in London.

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Travellers Tales

Aligned to Psygnosis and currently completing work on Psygnosis' Mario-beater, Rascal, Travellers Tales deserves mention here since they have also coded several titles for Sega of Japan, including Sonic Blast, Toy Story and then 32-Bitters like Mickey Mania and Sega's upcoming Sonic title— Sonic R. This makes them unique in coding history as this is the first outside, non-Japanese company that Sega has allowed to program a game involving their figurehead Sonic. Once Rascal is completed, expect to hear more about this small, talented team.

Travellers Tales is one of those developers who has remained independent and out of the video game spotlight. Having very quietly programmed well-known platform games like Mickey Mania and Sonic Blast, Travellers Tales is now going public with Sega's new Sonic racing game Sonic R and Psygnosis' Rascal.

deep space so well. That's a game that's as groundbreaking in its own way as the first WipeOut game or Destruction Derby was. We're pleased to say that every year we have a few games in the 'benchmark achievement' category."

Psygnosis, of course, was the first of the big guns to be picked up by a publisher/manufacturer who wanted to take advantage of their new hardware, and the logic behind the move is clear.

"As part of Sony," Day said, "Psygnosis enjoyed early access to PlayStation development tools. Our developers have always been ambitious in terms of creating 'hot technology' titles, and PlayStation was a platform that would finally allow them to create the games they really wanted to. Additionally, being part of Sony allowed for the kind of global investment that's required to be truly competitive on a worldwide scale."

But not everything is about the economies of scale. While Probe joined Acclaim and Psygnosis were bought by Sony, Argonaut has been more cautious. While many would love to get their hands on their coding experience, Argonaut has clung to their independence fiercely. "We're independent because we wanted to be," San said. "Being 'bought' wasn't high on our list of wants, so we did our best to spread our eggs (never developing too many games for any one publisher), and also turned down several offers to buy us out. We're in it for the long haul. We want to go public one day; we want to keep control of our own destiny for as long as possible. We do have outside investors, but these are largely from the financial community where they have no platform or company bias. They just want to see the company do well and they profit when we are successful."

Over the last two years, Probe Entertainment has shrugged off their reputation for arcade conversions and licenses and become one of the top development houses in the world, although the company began, like many others in Britain, in a tiny bedroom. As traditional coding platforms like the Amiga, a few in the U.K. coding industry have expressed concern that the business will shortly experience a lack of "new blood."

Probe Entertainment boss Fergus McGovern is more upbeat. "There was a time when you had individual programmers who, because they had been at home, they'd trained themselves," McGovern said, "and suddenly you thought, 'Where the hell has this guy come from? He knows the Spectrum like the back of his hand,' or 'He knows the Amiga like the back of his hand,' because they'd spent time in their back bedrooms learning the hardware, coding in machine code and really analyzing how the machine worked. So that at the end of the day what happened was that you'd have one or perhaps two programmers who really controlled 100 percent of the whole product, and you would be reliant on them.

"As the machines have grown in power, they've grown in chipsets, the style of programming has changed over to things like C++ and you can now break up the game into a number of segments that will allow more structured programming to occur. What I mean by that is if

Psygnosis

Almost too many titles to mention in their portfolio, and a similar number of smaller developers like Bizarre Creations, Hammerhead and Wheelhaus working for them. Although the company was bought by Sony in 1993, few would disagree that without the vision of Psygnosis and its MD, Ian Hetherington, the PlayStation would have had a far quieter launch. So far, Psygnosis has been responsible for some of the most groundbreaking software seen in the home, with titles like WipeOut and WipeOut XL, the two Destruction Derby titles and shortly, G Police and Colony Wars. In the 16-Bit days, Psygnosis was best known for attractive titles lacking in gameplay, but that all changed with the launch of the PlayStation. Although Sony tried to sell Psygnosis last year, they called it off again and wisely so. If it ain't broke, don't fix it.
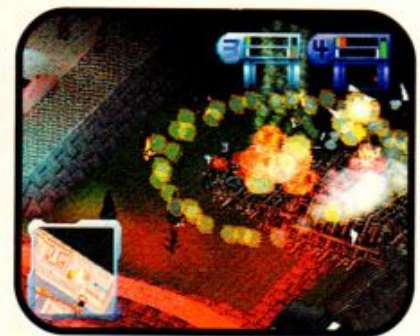
With the necessary backing of Sony, Psygnosis is the one British developer who has been able to make it on their own in the U.S. Great games like G Police, Colony Wars and Rascal help too.
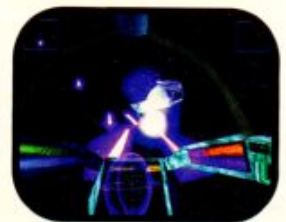
Gremlin

Steadfast 16-Bit developers who moved over to 32-Bit with ease, launching Loaded and the Actua sports series onto the PlayStation. Gremlin's recent acquisition of DMA Design should reinforce their position as a top U.K. developer and publisher, as will forthcoming titles N2o and Buggy.
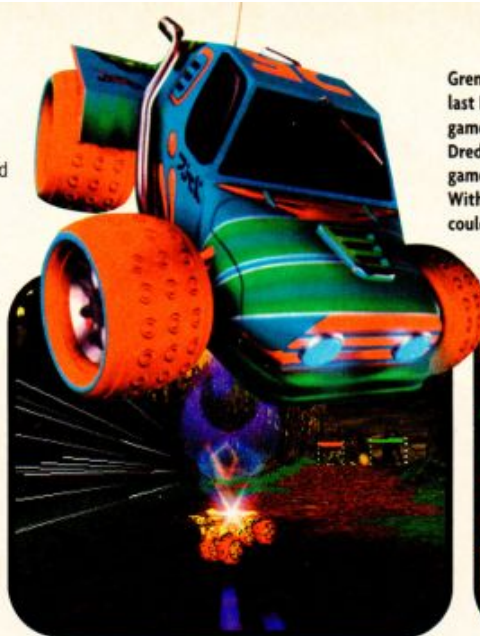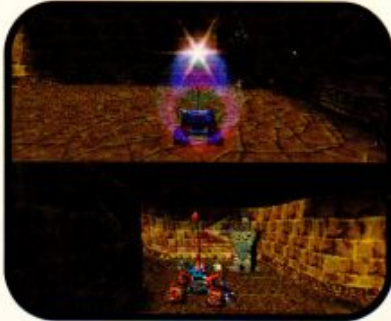
Gremlin is a company that deserves further observation. At the last ECTS show in London they were demonstrating a few AAA games including an off-road racing game, a two-player Judge Dredd light-gun game, a filled-polygon 'Tempest'-type twitch game and an outstanding version of the *Men In Black* movie. With solid backing, Gremlin could easily be the next 'Core' that could propel a U.S. company into instant top 10 status.
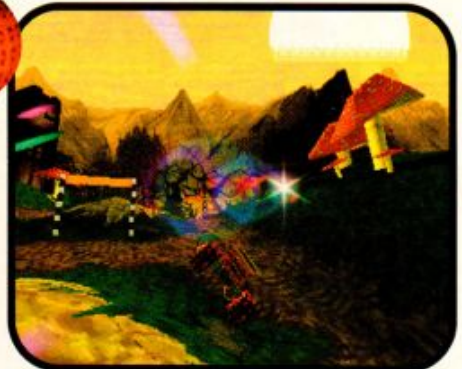
you've got a bike-racing game, you might have someone who does the bikes, someone who does the track mechanics, someone who does the special effects, and because you're not training someone to develop the whole game, you can train people to develop part of the game. We've found that if you're very selective when you process your crews, then you can find very clever guys who, given the opportunity, are just as good as the seasoned game programmers."

This in effect brings the U.K. and United States closer together in terms of programming skill, although McGovern still thinks that the U.K. can pull gems out of the hat. "I certainly believe that the U.K. is a fertile breeding ground of programming and game creation skill," he said, "and we have our own unique style in the way we do things, right down from the Rares who surprise everyone with Donkey Kong, the DMAs who suddenly create Lemmings, to someone like Peter Molyneux and even a place like Probe. We were recognized once as very much producing conversions and licensed product. And then, in

one fell swoop, because we didn't need to do that anymore, we transferred to selecting our own properties and developing original games, which are to my mind getting very good press. So I think we're a lot more flexible, and I do believe that U.K. programmers and developers are a lot faster in development."

Probe Entertainment isn't the only outfit to be swallowed up by a large corporate. Last year, Core Design in Derby joined Eidos, and Core boss Jeremy Smith is in no doubt how the future would have been on their own. "Tough," Smith said. "The funding of development is so expensive that I doubt we could have continued to fund ourselves as an independent company."

The trouble is that with Tomb Raider, Core Design has created a rod for their own back. "Obviously, everyone is waiting to see what we do next," Smith said, "which puts a certain amount of pressure on us. However, we know the potential of what we are working on and feel confident we will not disappoint anybody."

Like most developers we spoke to, Smith

feels that British coders have come to grips with the new technology. "U.K. companies had to write games on ridiculously under-powered machines for a long time," Smith said. "Now that we have the new platforms, we are showing how good we are as a development community."

The proof, of course, is in the games, many of which are considered the best in the industry. And the flow of hot titles from the other side of the Atlantic shows no sign of slowing. By this Christmas, there will be more than 50 new games in the stores that are the products of British development teams.

And here's one final surprise: Not all of these games were made in the U.K. British programmers, designers and artists have infiltrated virtually all of the U.S. development houses. Companies like Shiny, Iguana, Acclaim and GT have hired talented support staff from Britain for their behind-the-scenes work in the United States. Yes, the British have arrived, and their coding genius will continue to have a profound effect on gaming's future. ■

Argonaut

Legends in the business, Argonaut doesn't only earn respect for the programming skills on titles like Star Fox, they also design hardware (like the Super FX chip for Nintendo) as well as development software like Brender. Now working closely with Fox Interactive (Croc), Jez San and his team are also putting the final touches on Alien Resurrection for the PlayStation and Saturn, while the possibility of a Nintendo Alien title has not been discounted.

Fox outscooped the other American publishing houses when they licensed Croc from Argonaut earlier this year. This fun-to-play and extremely well-designed platform game has all the makings of an instant hit this Christmas. With Alien Resurrection not far behind, Fox has found a long-term partner for success.

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