

Nintendo's Super Stamper Bros.

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Nintendo's "Super Stamper Bros."



Rare is one of the most secretive game companies in the world. It produces great games — not hype. And the company's been doing it since 1981. Following the success of 8-bit home computer hits (like *Knight Lore*, *JetPac*, and *Alien 8*) in the early '80s, Tim and Chris Stamper reverse-engineered an NES and became Nintendo's first official Western developer. The company produced more than 90 NES, Game Boy, and Super NES titles ("paying their dues," as the two call it) and are now riding high as the outfit responsible for *Donkey Kong Country* and Nintendo 64 hits *Goldeneye*, *Banjo-Kazooie*, *Conker's Quest*, and *DK Racing*.

In early 1995, Nintendo purchased a 25% stake in the U.K.-based company, thus ensuring its support for future hardware generations. Recently, **Next Generation** met with Rare's head honchos, Tim Stamper, creative director, and Chris Stamper, technical director, to find out a little more about Nintendo's right-hand men.

Nintendo's favorites ...

NG: Rare's been very secretive over the years. Why is this?

Tim: 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, we'd rather promote and push our videogames as far as we can.

Chris: Also, there just aren't enough hours in the day. We've been working ridiculous hours, seven days a week. And I'd much rather focus on the games we're working on than actually promoting ourselves. 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, and when we're happy with one part, we just move on to the next, so it never ends.

NG: Do you think this sobriety and lack of exhibitionism was part of your attraction to Nintendo? It's also a company that keeps its cards very close to its chest ...

Chris: I think Nintendo was very comfortable with us because our objective has always been quality videogames first. That is our number one priority. So I think there's a natural sort of synergy between Rare and Nintendo.

NG: Rare and Nintendo certainly seem to share a similar design philosophy ...

Tim: We've been working with them for 12 years, 13 years — a long time. And our target market and audience is the same as theirs. We both want games to do well in Japan and America.

NG: So is there much communication between Rare and Nintendo?

Tim: Yeah, we occasionally go down and visit them.
Chris: But we don't have any input as such into their games. When we visit them, they show us what they're working on, and when they visit us, we show them what we're working on.

They don't get involved with us at all — we decide what games we're going to write and we decide exactly what we're going to do. Nintendo just sort of expects us to produce great games, and that's exactly what we're

here for. We decide at Rare all of the games that we're going to write, and then Nintendo will be the first people that will actually see the game in progress. But the design and the initial decision to go ahead with each game happens here.

NG: So Nintendo and Rare don't work as hand-in-hand as people might expect?

Chris: No. Obviously Nintendo will say, "We'd love this or that type of game" or whatever, and we would certainly listen. But we pretty much decide what it is we want to produce.

NG: Is this type of autonomy strained when Rare works with a Nintendo property such as *Donkey Kong*?

Chris: In the instance of *Donkey Kong* it was, but you have to remember there was nothing available on *Donkey Kong* before we took it on board. There was no *Donkey Kong* game or developed character — it was just this small sprite from this arcade game from way back. When you say "*Donkey Kong*" now you don't imagine the old game, you imagine the new game.

Definitely not PC

NG: Rare must be one of only a few developers in the world not working with the PC. Have you no desire to do so?

Chris: None at all.

NG: Why?

Chris: I'm very, very comfortable working on Nintendo 64. I see the PC as something of a nightmare in terms of trying to produce games for it. For myself, involved with the technical side, Nintendo 64 is a wonderful machine to work on ...

Tim: That doesn't mean to say we don't play PC games because we do.

Chris: [laughs]. That's true. But the thing I like about Nintendo 64, and I don't think many people realize this, is

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Chris Stamper, technical director

that because it's a cartridge-based machine, although some people see that as a disadvantage, each time you add a larger cartridge to Nintendo 64, you're changing the whole machine itself, and it becomes more powerful. The PlayStation is pretty much fixed in what it is, but as time progresses, Nintendo 64 is becoming a more capable machine.

So I think you're going to see that Nintendo 64 games are going to continue to improve and grow. Not only will we see evolution in the techniques that we use to make games, but because of cartridges getting larger and because you can dynamically download so much information from the cartridge, it's like having a bigger machine with more memory. So Nintendo 64 is a wonderful machine to actually work on, and I think that its future is quite interesting.

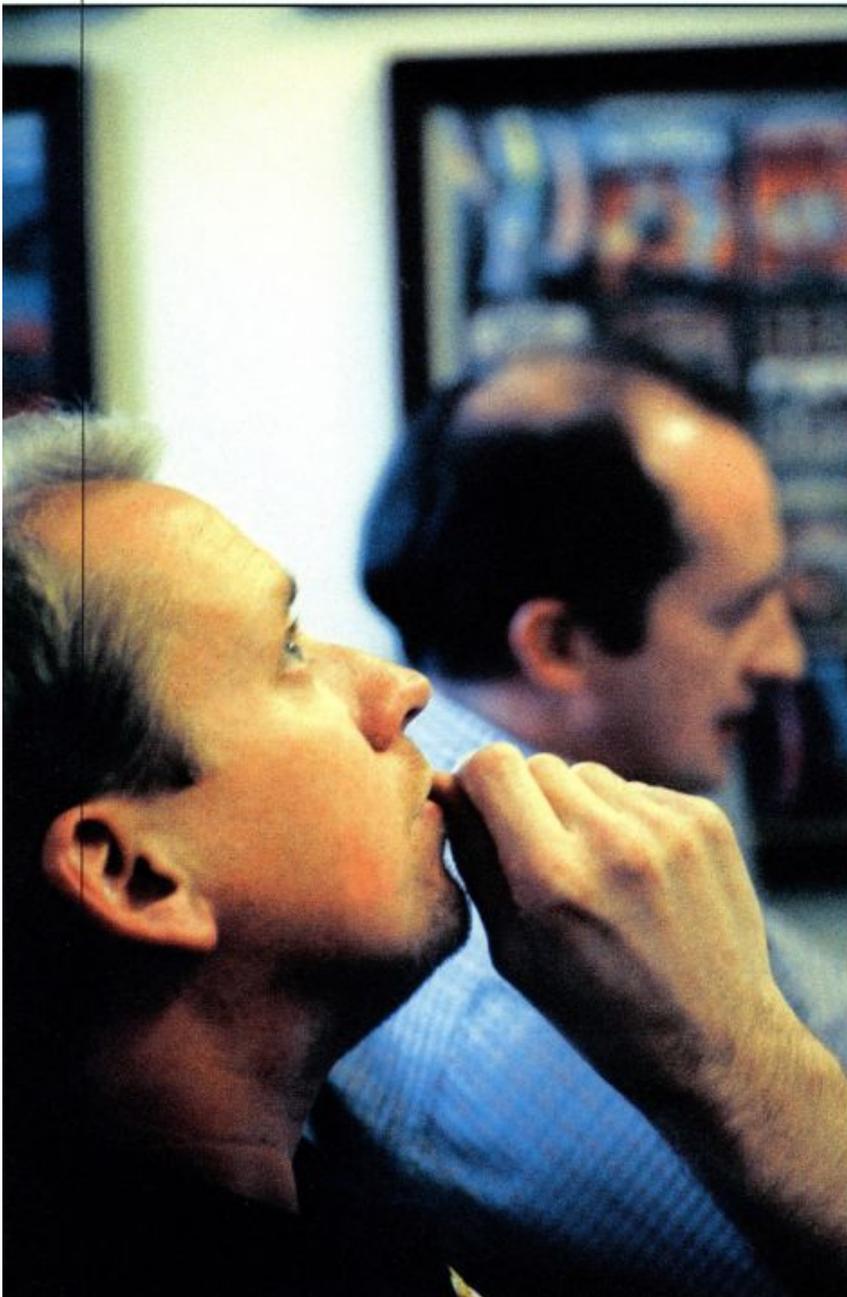
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NG: But surely the PC continues to evolve also, and a top-end PC with a 3D card is arguably more powerful than Nintendo 64.

Chris: It probably is, but we're much happier producing on a standard format that we know exists and is designed for actually playing games.

NG: PlayStation development and PC development seem to go hand-in-hand, and it's relatively easy to convert a game from one system to the other. Would you agree that it's harder to develop Nintendo 64 games in tandem with the PC?

Chris: I think if you're going to develop a game 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 Nintendo 64 and say, "OK, what's the best possible game that we can produce on that?" with no thoughts of how we might convert it to another platform. And I think this is important.

Also, and this is something we touched on before, we want to be in a position where we can throw enough resources at developing a game, comfortable in the belief that we can get that return back to carry on the process. I don't think we could do that on the PC and I don't think we could do that on the PlayStation — I just think it's too confused a market.

NG: As far as the PC is concerned, don't you see much potential for networked, multiplayer gaming?

Tim: 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 that if you have to go and play a game over the network, it simply shows that the AI in the game is not good enough.

The best network gaming experience is when you get a networked machine connected to people you know, say in a company building where you've got a network and you can play six or eight PCs across the network. Then you can get people fighting in groups and it's good fun — it's really, really good fun.

But why anyone would want to play anybody that they don't even know is completely beyond me. The whole point of playing a network game is that afterwards, if you win, you can go around and make fun of your opponent in person and say, "I kicked your butt!" or whatever — it's just part of the whole social thing. But to play somebody miles away whom you don't know is just such a bizarre concept. I find it very alien.

Chris: For me, multiplayer games are about four people sitting at one screen ...

Tim: But you have to know the people you're playing with. It's like in an arcade with a two-, three-, or four-player game. If there are people on the machine you don't know, you don't generally want to join in, especially if they're bigger than you and you beat them.

Breaking the 16-bit mold

NG: *Donkey Kong Country* was a revolutionary game for the Super NES and single-handedly breathed life into the dying 16-bit generation. Was this game a turning point for Rare?

Chris: It was a step that we worked very hard to achieve. We'd done a lot of "me too" type products on the NES and that gave us the resources. Then, when the market changed, we were able to use these resources to produce *Donkey Kong* and *Killer Instinct* and those type of products.

NG: Would you agree that nobody else could have produced *Donkey Kong Country* at the time it was produced?

Chris: I think that's probably very, very true. I think that you have to have the resources and you have to have the confidence.

Tim: 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 Rare'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," but then somebody else would have gotten hold of it, I'm sure.

It was a big decision, a big decision for Rare. If that had gone wrong, it probably would have broken the company.

NG: So producing *Donkey Kong Country* was a case of getting out the calculator and working out how much rendering was required ...

Chris: Yes, we worked out how much the SG equipment and all of the licenses for the seats would cost. It was a lot of money, a big investment for that type of game.

NG: Presumably the profits more than balanced the books?

Chris: Well yes, I think it's in the *Guinness Book of Records*. It's just a phenomenal seller.

NG: Does all this big-budget investment and success mean that there is no longer room in the videogame industry for small developers starting out? Could a new, small company — perhaps similar to Ultimate, the company that Rare grew from in the 8-bit era — compete with the likes of *Donkey Kong Country*?

Chris: 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 know that it's not purely an issue of money or time. So I think there are opportunities for those small developers, but it does need to be with someone who does have the resources to actually make it all happen. The equipment you need, the time you need — it's a big undertaking.

NG: So what would it take, in development terms, to compete with a game like *Conker's Quest*?

Chris: Realistically, a developer needs 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 ...

Tim: 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 if they had the resources, they should contact a bigger software company and see if they can get some sponsorship or some assistance.

Chris: Yeah, I think it's about getting the deal. That's exactly what we did. There are steps that you have to take, and if you think you're going to jump right to the top on the very first game, you'll quickly find out that it's just going to be very difficult to do. There's nothing wrong with moving one step at a time, and that's exactly what Rare did. We paid our dues in terms of producing a lot of conversions in the early days.

Tim: These resources that we now have are the result of Rare having gone through all the stages and processes that other companies have to go through to reach the point that we've managed to reach now. In the past we've had to do conversions, third-party work — jobs 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.

NG: You say Rare can now produce its "dream products." You've just expanded to fill a whole new building. Does this mean yet more Nintendo 64 development, or will you broaden your horizons to develop for other formats?

Chris: I expect us to continue producing high-quality Nintendo products, but I also see this new building as giving us resources to develop coin-op games. Also, if we have a group of guys in the company that comes to us and says, "Look, we've got this really great idea and we need a year, we need this equipment, we'd like to go

ahead and do it," then I think that Rare is in the enviable position of being able to say to them, "OK, take a year, and if after that the game looks good, we'll proceed with it."

NG: And what do you see as the ultimate "dream product"?

Tim: I guess the ultimate game would be one that would always manage to change itself and so you would never get bored with it. Like golf, for example, which lots of people get addicted to. Sure, they might change courses and have a different experience each time they play, but it's always the same game. I wonder if one day a videogame would ever reach that sort of status — that would be a game that would be great to write.

Pride and prejudice

NG: Which Rare game holds the fondest memories for you?

Tim: The ones we haven't written yet [laughs].

Chris: Yes, it's the games that we're actually working on now that we find most exciting.

NG: Across the industry as a whole, do you think games are getting better?

Tim: 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

The ultimate game would be one that would always manage to change itself

Tim Stamper, creative director

perpetuates the industry. We're all gamers at Rare. 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 that looks good but you're unhappy with it.

Traditionally, our core audience is probably 12 years old, which is younger than the PlayStation audience, which is around 21 years old. Our audience hasn't got a lot of disposable income and it's very, very important that when they buy a game that the game is good.

NG: How do you feel about making "kids" games aimed for 12-year-olds? Don't you get tired of it?

Tim: Our games are designed so that both experienced and novice players will get a great deal of enjoyment from them. The experienced gamer will have the opportunity to experience the whole game as it was intended. On the other hand, 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.

Also, I think that if you look at successful movies, there aren't many that aren't parental-discretion-recommended rated. Films have to appeal across the board to be very, very successful and similarly, we're here to write a successful game and not target a core or specific audience. There are a lot of games now that are



Chris Stamper



Tim Stamper

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dark and depressing, and kids don't want to play them. Maybe all of these companies that are out there are producing these types of games, maybe they're writing games for themselves and not for the audience.

NG: Do you not ever feel like writing a game for yourselves instead?

Chris: I love the "Nintendo-style" games, so we are making games for ourselves. For me, *DK Racing* is a game style that will have appeal across the generations, and I think that's great. I don't want to play games that are targeted or skewed for the higher age groups. I want to play something that's fun.

NG: *Goldeneye* is a very adult game, with some very adult content ...

Chris: I thought that *Goldeneye* was great! I wish that somehow we could get that sort of gameplay and skew it to the 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.

NG: Were you ever worried about Nintendo's reaction to the violence in *Goldeneye*?

Tim: Yes, we were very worried [laughs].

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

Tim: And not licensed to limp [laughs]. I mean, the character wasn't created by us. We were just producing the game around the movie.



NG: When making *Goldeneye*, were you worried about the implications of doing a movie-license game?

Chris: We were concerned about taking on the Bond license, but I do think that because of our reputation, we had a lot more flexibility than any other company would have had.

NG: Will there be another Bond game?

Tim: Yes, we are working on another game with the Bond team.

Chris: And at the moment they're working to make some significant improvements to the engine, so I'm sure they'll come up with something very exciting for the future.

PlayStation? No thanks

NG: Obviously, you're big fans of Nintendo. But you can't deny the success of PlayStation. How do you account for Sony's rise from nowhere?

Chris: I think Sony has a wonderful brand name and 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 Nintendo 64. And if you're looking for a machine where the quality of the games will continue to improve, the Nintendo 64 is the only candidate.

Tim: Well, with regards to developer support, I think Sony has made it really easy for a smaller developer to jump online with its system and produce a game that is going to be sold. I don't know how many copies these people are selling, but I gather it's not very many units — especially with a company that is not fully funded.

NG: Do you think Nintendo has got it right in terms of the number of titles it has released for Nintendo 64? If you had the choice, would you prefer to do more?

Tim: I'd sooner do fewer titles that were of higher quality. I'd rather see one single, high-quality game rather than ten low-quality games.

NG: What are the dangers of too much low-quality software?

Chris: The danger is quite simple. If there is an overcrowding, there are too many games, and this results in confusion for the gamers and a tendency to reduce the price of games. And with smaller revenues, how are the developers ever going to generate enough resources to actually produce triple-A games? It's never going to happen.

In this respect, I would say that PlayStation is on a downward spiral market and Nintendo 64 is on an upward spiral market.

NG: You see the PlayStation market heading in a downward spiral? That would mean that the majority of software companies are headed for disaster.

If a crash similar to the one at the end of the 16-bit era happened again, couldn't Nintendo and Rare be dragged down with everyone else?

Chris: I think we're all aware that it is a fashion business, and companies have to be ready for the lean times. Rare is prepared for when the market changes, but the PlayStation developers I've spoken to lead a pretty hand-to-mouth existence, and when the market changes, they're going to be in trouble.

Tim: But this 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 the possible demise of the game industry for 15 years, but the industry's still here and we're still here producing games.