

The Euro Files. Inside Europe's Games Industry

Article scanné dans le magazine N64 n°05 (Août 1997)

Sujet de l'article : E3 1997

Scans réalisés par les membres du site Nintendo64EVER, usage exclusivement destiné aux autres membres du site. Toute reproduction, partielle ou complète, ainsi que la diffusion de ce fichier est interdite. Les magazines originaux sont la propriété intellectuelle exclusive de leurs éditeurs respectifs, les scans regroupés dans ce fichier ont un but uniquement documentatif et informatif, aucune exploitation commerciale ne peut en être faite.





Donkey Kong Country. Blast Corps. Starfox. Killer Instinct. You'd be amazed how many so-called Nintendo games actually originate here in Britain. And France. Let us, then, visit the European game developers who are out-Japanesing the Japanese, and see what they've got tucked up their sleeves...

THE EURO FILES

inside Europe's games industry

by Mark Ramshaw



No matter how grateful we are to Nintendo for the SNES, and more recently their N64 wonder machine, there's no getting away from the fact that we Europeans have never enjoyed quite the same level of attention as our Japanese and American counterparts.

Thanks to the PAL TV system, we've had to endure letterbox displays and slower game speeds. Because of our location, we've often been unable to get hold of the choicest software until months after gamers in other corners of the world. And with a lengthy succession of Nintendo-appointed UK distributors and some not-very-convincing arguments about import costs, we've always had to pay more for the privilege of playing Nintendo. And

still we keep coming back for more. Why? Well, with systems as good as Nintendo's, and software as impossibly great as the Mario series, how could we not?

But it's important to note that Nintendo's apparent ambivalence toward Europe has also had a marked effect on the development community. Left to their own devices, it was the Europeans who turned the SNES around, coming up with tricks and technology to breath new life into the system. The upshot of this is that Europe is set to play a far bigger part in Nintendo's N64 plans, with the likes of Rare, DMA and Argonaut once again leading the way. If anybody can match the dizzy heights reached by Shigeru Miyamoto and his pals at Nintendo, it's got to be these guys...



August 1997



Nintendo and Europe

The story so far

While the Nintendo brand has been familiar in Europe since the launch of the NES in the early '80s, the Japanese giant's success in its home country and America has never really been replicated here. Mattel briefly distributed the NES in the UK, with ex-Nintendo of America man Ron Judy later taking control of the situation via his private company, confusingly called Nintendo International. It was to be the Game Boy rather than the NES which excited the Europeans, though, with the hand-held system selling 1.4 million in the first year in France alone.

Realising the potential of the market, and also recognising that each country required a different approach, Nintendo of Japan's Hiroshi Yamauchi established Nintendo of Europe to assist the European distributors; primarily Judy's company until he handed over the territories to Bandai in 1992. By this time, the European

division sales were actually exceeding those of the Nintendo of America, despite Nintendo's decision to hold back the SNES system.

This move cost them dearly, with Sega pulling ahead in the console race thanks to a 16-bit chip at the heart of their Mega Drive. While the SNES, with its more stringently quality-controlled games, and the impressive allure of Mode 7, could have trounced Sega's machine, there was no way the ageing 8-bit based NES system could compete.

But because European developers were often left to their own devices with Nintendo's NES and SNES systems, a period of genuine creativity was spawned. Some, such as Rare and Software Creations, actually reverse-engineered technology without permission, though when Nintendo saw what such teams were capable of, they wisely decided to make them allies rather than enemies.

And just as European developers proved inventive with the hardware, so

they learned to be more ambitious and technically audacious in terms of game design. Nintendo had to sit up and take notice: witness the likes of *Starfox* from Argonaut and the accompanying FX chip technology, or the brilliantly original *Uniracers* from DMA. And you only have to look at Rare to see just how crucial to Nintendo's gameplan a European developer can become.

The lesson learned, Nintendo has taken care to ensure that their N64 Dream Team includes a strong selection of European developers, and that third party teams in general are given the attention and help they need to craft the next generation of European Nintendo software. Software Creations' *Creator* project and Rare's forthcoming *Banjo-Kazooie* are only the tip of the iceberg. There's a whole barrage of European software on the way, and every indication that our home teams are already capable of matching their Japanese and American friends in the N64 arena.



EUROPE

The developers

Software Creations



Like many of the European developers, Manchester-based Software Creations (part of Rage Software's empire) have yet to make their presence felt in the world of N64 gaming, but already have a solid history with Nintendo. Some 40 releases over the last few years, including *Equinox*, *Solstice* and the excellent *Plok*, have cemented the relationship beyond reproach.

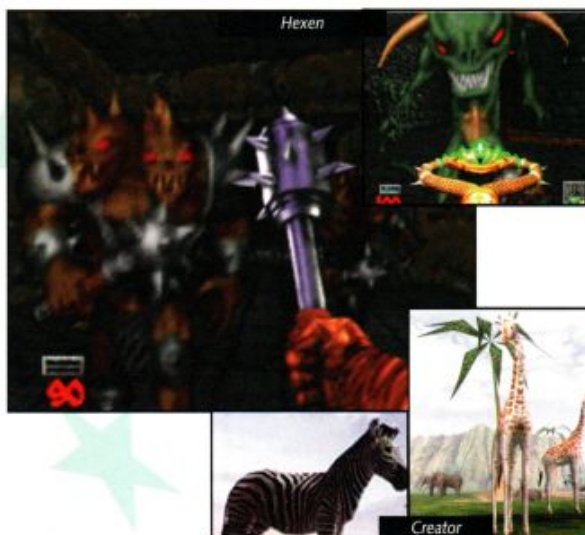
The company was actually founded ten years ago. "Mike Webb, chairman of Software Creations, kicked it off by reverse-engineering the NES and showing it to Nintendo," relates managing director Paul Hibbard. The close relationship between the two companies which grew from there eventually resulted in Software Creations becoming a member of the Dream Team in 1995, and even producing the sound utilities for N64 developers to use. Paul: "I guess there aren't many third parties with that much experience of N64, as we're finding out by the number of people who want us to work with them."

Because of their close ties to Nintendo, Software Creations are playing things very close to their collective chests. "I wish we could show the world the product we're working on for them – it's staggering," says Paul, referring to *Creator* (a working title only). Sadly, it's looks like we'll have to wait until the Shoshinkai show in November before we can

see what's become of this highly promising and utterly unique game-cum-plaything.

In the meantime, there's Software Creations' *Hexen* to look forward to. Just on sale in the USA, GT should be bringing this accurate conversion of id and Raven's PC hit to these shores very soon. *Hexen* may not have quite the same status as *Doom*, but remember that it does boast the technically-superb four-way split-screen multi-player mode.

And then there's *Blade & Barrel*, which Software Creations have been working on for Kemco. Early glimpses looked quite promising, but the game is now being completely changed, and won't even be called *Blade & Barrel* at all (apparently that was only ever a working title, anyway). "In development you reach a point in the cycle and sometimes just don't think the gameplay is going to work," says Paul Hibbard. "So the whole thing is being revamped to make it the sort of game Nintendo will be happy with."



Gremlin Interactive



With history stretching back to the days of the Spectrum and Commodore 64

home computers, and a successful track record on the PC, Gremlin have only recently moved into the console arena (discounting a brief paddle in the 16-bit pool with a couple of *Zool* games ages ago).

Nevertheless, with the recent acquisition of DMA Design (see separate section), and the highly-rated *Actua* sports series already well underway on other formats, signs are that Gremlin could be a

solid performer in the world of N64. No games have been confirmed yet, but we can reveal that *Actua Soccer* will definitely make it to the N64 in some form or another, and don't be too surprised to see *Actua Golf*, *Actua Tennis* and *Actua Ice Hockey* making the leap to Nintendo either.

Whether Gremlin's soccer star can compete against Konami's *ISS64* is another matter altogether, of course. Still, there's always the promise of fresh material from DMA to look forward to, probably appearing towards the end of next year.



August 1997

N64 107



Acclaim/Probe/Iguana

While Acclaim is an American-founded publisher (hence its entry in last month's USA round-up), it does own two development teams over in the UK, namely Iguana's North-East-based division and Probe Entertainment, bought out by the US giant a couple of years ago.

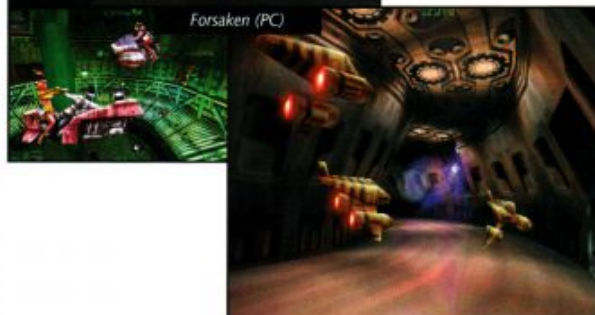
Probe have an initial batch of three N64 games in development, of which *Extreme G* will be the first to emerge. It's been likened to Psygnosis' Playstation hit *Wipeout*, with futuristic racing vehicles pounding down suitably space-age courses, corkscrew turns and all.

A football game, codenamed *Ultra Soccer*, is also in the works,

and Acclaim claim it "will rival Konami's *ISS64*". It's possible that the *Ultra Soccer* moniker may stick, with a suitable football-related licence currently looking unlikely.

The third Probe project will be announced soon, although they're meant to be working on a conversion of *Forsaken*, one of their upcoming PC titles. The programmers have already got the first few levels up and running, apparently, and plan to have it completed some time around spring of next year.

And at Iguana, again, there are another couple of N64 games underway, but Acclaim is keeping tight-lipped about them at this point.



Virgin Interactive

With only *Freak Boy* from the guys at Virgin's California division on their N64 release schedule, and even

that title's future currently in doubt, it looks like Virgin Interactive probably won't be a name to watch out for. Bit of a shame, that.

MicroProse

MicroProse were one of the original Dream Team developers, and had an N64 interpretation of their *Top Gun* action-heavy flight

simulation in the works.

But the costs, and difficulties with working on a cartridge, were deemed too obstructive, so the project and all other N64 plans have been shelved.

Argonaut

Given that it was 3D graphics specialists Argonaut who changed the face of SNES gaming with *Starfox* and the Super FX chip, many were surprised when the veteran Brit developer wasn't announced as a Dream Team member, the task of updating the tale of Fox McCloud for the N64 instead going to Shigeru Miyamoto himself.

Happily, Argonaut have now jumped back on board the good ship Nintendo, with two games currently underway. "One is fairly well advanced, though neither have a publisher yet," says Argonaut's Keith Robinson. This obviously means that Argonaut are actually

funding the development until the right deal can be found. Keith admits there have been talks with Nintendo themselves, but no deals have yet been made. "We're looking to have one complete early next year and the second by the third quarter of '98," he told us.

Given that Argonaut worked on their own add-on hardware for the SNES, rumours will inevitably start soon about their involvement with the N64. "At the moment, we're just programming the games to handle everything in software, but we have taken a look at the N64's libraries," says Keith. Expect more news towards the end of summer, possibly at the Japanese Shoshinkai show.

BMG

Publishing giant BMG have only one confirmed N64 title at the moment, in the form of DMA's highly anticipated *Silicon Valley* (see our

preview on page 21 for details).

More titles from UK and global developers are expected to be added to the line-up sometime soon, though.

Psygnosis and Traveller's Tales

The official word is that Psygnosis still have no plans for N64. But even though they are a Sony-owned publisher, there have been rumours in the past that Nintendo development might be a possibility.

The question isn't just whether Nintendo are likely to grant them a licence, but also whether Psygnosis

would be willing to brave the cost-heavy cartridge market again. This in turn means that Traveller's Tales, long-time developer for Psygnosis and the team behind several notable SNES games, will also be channelling efforts into PC and Playstation software for the near future. Boo, hiss, ad-lib to fade, etc.

Eidos



The rapidly-expanding Eidos show no signs of slowing down, seemingly still intent on signing up anything that looks remotely like a programming team.

This means that Ion Storm's titles (as detailed in last month's American round-up) will be published by this relative newcomer, along with their own fare from Core, Simis and several other wholly- and part-owned development teams. Five N64 games are currently in development, including the already-legendary *Tomb Raider 2* – something of a

surprise, given that it was thought to have been a Playstation exclusive, console-wise. Touted by some as an equal to *Mario* and *Turok*, the original *Tomb Raider* made a superstar out of game heroine Lara Croft, thanks to her over-pneumatic figure as much as her silky-smooth animation. This sequel takes the girl out of the catacombs and into typically Indiana Jones-esque exotic locales, namely Venice and China, Great Wall and all.

There's also some kind of a strategy game in the works from Glasgow-based Red Lemon (founded

by ex-Gremlin Actua Soccer coders), but beyond that Eidos are saying nothing at all.



Titus



The French developer Titus first made a name for themselves with Nintendo gamers back in 1991, with NES (and later Gameboy and SNES) versions of hit Amiga platformer *The Blues Brothers*. By resisting the urge to release the game on any Sega formats, Titus not only became a Nintendo ally, but also helped the game to sell around 200,000 copies.

Lamborghini 64 will be their first N64 title, updating an earlier SNES racer. Development actually started over two years ago, which initially meant working on a Silicon Graphics machine and hoping the transition to an N64 development kit wouldn't be too hard.

"I would say it's about ninety percent complete," Titus' Managing Director Eric Caen informed us. "We spent a full year on the physics of the car and the control system alone. We think it's this that'll make the game very different." A purpose-written collision profiler has also been used extensively, enabling Titus to put loads of different cars on the track, each with different weights, speeds and attributes, then calculate the collisions between them at speed. Eric estimates that these collision algorithms alone took six months to perfect.

For their second N64 title, Titus have returned to the land of licences, this time with *Superman*. "We've got all the characters modelled, and are working on the animation now," says Eric. "We decided not to use real-time motion capture, but are using animators instead. Comparing the results against the characters in *Turok* or *Mario*, it's already faring well," he asserts, forcefully.

The gameplay will be a mix of *Pilotwings*-inspired flying, ground-based adventuring (in a style not unlike *Tomb Raider*) and full 3D, *Tekken*-esque beat-'em-up action



for the combat sequences. "I want this to be very different to other super-hero games" enthuses Eric. "Imagine the villain not only using his fist and legs to fight, but also, for example, throwing a school bus at Superman's face, in full 3D. We didn't want to do a predictable, boring licensed platform game."

As is the norm with comic book translations, Superman owners Warners insist on approving all the artwork. "We've worked with Disney in the past, but Warners are proving much worse," laughs Eric. "It's good that they're protecting their property and making sure we get it right. But it's also not so good, because it's so time-consuming."

Titus' third N64 title, which has just been given approval by Nintendo, will be a chess game; not too surprising given that Titus' PC game *Virtual Chess* uses an AI engine which is currently world champion. "It's quite easy for us to do," says Eric, "so we might have it



ready for early '98" Finally, there's *Quest For Camelot*, licensed from the forthcoming animated

movie, also from Warners. The film and the game both draw on the Arthurian legend, but the hero isn't actually King Arthur. "It's a very appropriate setting for a *Zelda*-style game," reckons Eric. "Nintendo is very excited by us trying to do a role-playing game, and though it's a difficult style to get right, we're pretty confident we can do it."

With 95 percent of the R&D department working on the N64, Titus is obviously placing a lot of faith in Nintendo's new machine. Eric again: "It's the best platform, no question. And it's the only platform ruled by gameplay. Nintendo are very hard on developers, but just for one reason: good gameplay. And that's great. I'm pretty sure that this strategy will win the war for Nintendo." Wise words.





Rare



M

any people only know Rare for their work on *Killer Instinct* and *Donkey Kong Country*, but the company has far deeper roots than that. ZX Spectrum creations *Pssst*, *Jet Pac*, *Trans Am* and *Cookie* were the games which launched Rare's original incarnation, Ultimate Play The Game. These, followed by *Sabre Wulf*, *Lunar Jetman* and *Knight Lore*, gave UPG legendary status. Yet attempts to crack the Commodore 64 games market proved far less successful. So, with an eye to the future, 1994 saw UPG reborn as Rare Ltd, and signing up with Nintendo. A whole flurry of NES games followed, some highly rated (*Battletoads*), others much less impressive (*Wheel Of Fortune*).

It was to be the SNES which really consolidated the company's position as premier third party developer, though, with the ACM (advanced computer modelling) graphical effects of *Donkey Kong Country* making the game the biggest must-have since the *Mario* series. By the start of 1996, Nintendo had bought a quarter share in the company, a deal which Nintendo of Japan described at the time as a "major multi-million dollar capital investment"; not too hard to believe given the frightening number of Silicon Graphics machines to be found at Rare's Twycross offices.

Rare have already proven their worth with the excellent *Blast Corps*, so hopes are high that *GoldenEye 007* can elevate itself above the usual movie licence games, not to mention the other *Doom*-style first-person efforts rapidly appearing on the machine. Certainly the subtle touches, such as the ability to shoot an enemy in different parts of their body, sound very promising, as do the secret Bond villain sections. The game's now almost complete, due to be released in the US and Japan in August, and November over here.

There's much speculation of a new Kong-based creation from Rare, but for now the focus is on two brand new cartoon characters due to make their debut in *Banjo-Kazooie*, the game formerly known as *Dream*. This is the one, you may remember, that prompted Nintendo's Howard Lincoln to say, "I think it sets a new standard in graphics technology on any home system. In fact, I'm willing to stick my neck out and say that this is the same leap for Nintendo 64 as the

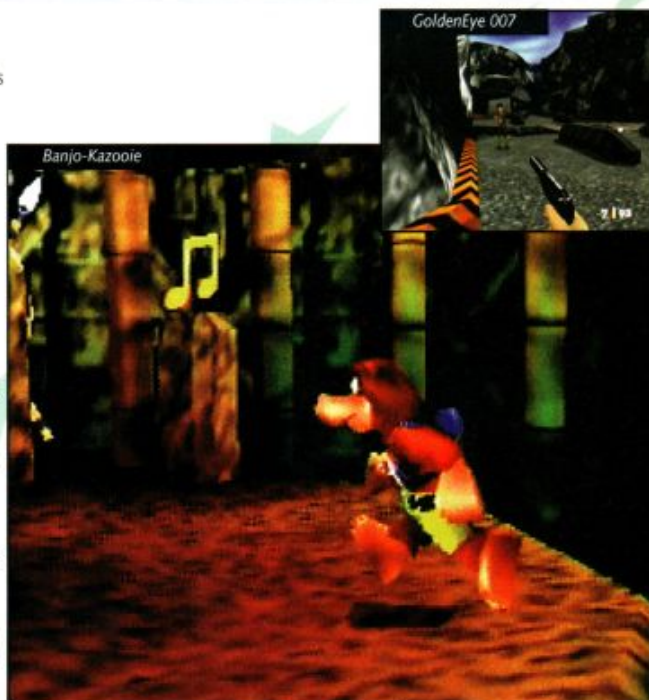
SNES experienced with *DKC*."

And the early indications are that Mr Lincoln is spot-on with his projections. *Banjo-Kazooie* looks even more intricate and accomplished than *Super Mario 64* itself, as our Future Look on pages 8 and 9 reveals. If Rare put as much imagination into the game's design as they're putting into the graphics, they could become as indispensable to Nintendo as a certain Mr Miyamoto is.

Rare's other big N64 project at the moment, which was also revealed for the first time at E3, is *Conker's Quest*. Another 3D platform game, this seems to be designed for the 'younger player', but looks every bit as technically advanced as *B-K*. It's in the very earliest stages at the moment, though, and we won't be getting our hands on it until next year.

After which... well, the campaign for a new *Jetman* game officially starts right here.

N



Ubi Soft

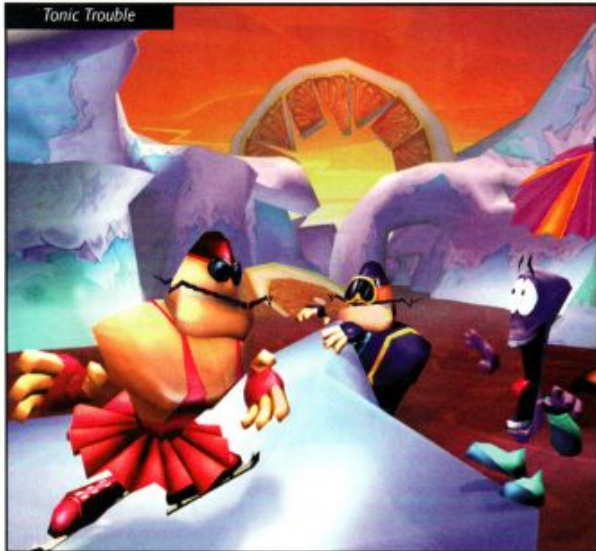
Best known for their Gameboy platformer *Rayman*, and *Mario Kart* challenger *Street Racer*, French label UbiSoft has actually been distributing other publishers' software in France since 1986, as well as creating their own games since 1991.

Tonic Trouble is the name of their first N64 effort, with a comic

book sensibility complementing the action-adventure gameplay. UbiSoft promises "a shedload of in-game characters, more than in any other title around", but beyond that things are still pretty sketchy. This one's due for a release early next year, with *F1 Pole Position 64* (the European version of *Human Grand Prix*) and one or two others to follow.

N

Tonic Trouble



Interplay/VIS Interactive

Interplay only have one UK-sourced title at the moment, but what a title! *Earthworm Jim 3D*, for those who missed last issue's preview, comes from the fertile minds of newcomers VIS Interactive. David Perry and Doug Tennapelare of Shiny Entertainment (who created the character, along with the first two *Earthworm Jim* games for PC and consoles) are working as consultants on the project, but the design is very much VIS's own, with a game style that's best described as a 3D action platformer with bells on.

Graphically, the idea is to make *EWJ3D* as close to a real cartoon as possible, which means faces and bodies which squash, stretch and distort, and strong black outlines running around Jim and the other game characters.

"Shiny designed Jim with cell animation, so we wanted to keep him as a real cartoon," explains VIS's Chris van der Kuyl. "It's been challenging to come up with technologies to make him look

cartoonish in a 3D world."

VIS are writing the game for a variety of formats, but promise that this won't be some quick N64 port. "We're working hard to differentiate the N64 version," continues Chris. "Obviously, it's going to look a million times better than the others, but it'll do more than any of them, too. And we're taking real advantage of analogue control. So with something like Jim's 'pocket rocket', which isn't a fixed polygon model, the analogue stick makes it possible to really feel it bend around corners."

VIS might have been going for a mere year and a half, but already publishers are clamouring to sign them up, and Chris's sights are set suitably high. "We're in the market

Ocean/Infogrames

Another big name from the home computer boom of the early '80s, Ocean are set to make an impressive debut on the N64 thanks to the European publishing rights to Imagineer's *Multi Racing Championship*, reviewed earlier in this issue.

Beyond that, gamers can look forward to *Mission: Impossible* from Ocean's US development team in November, and – a little further down the line – the first fruits from Ocean's newly-created N64-specific development team in Manchester.

Thanks to a recent merger with Infogrames (they who gave the SNES world *The Smurfs*), Ocean will now also be handling

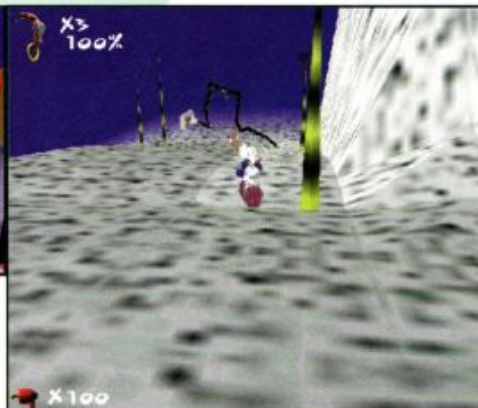
all the French publisher's N64 games, the first of which will be *Space Circus*, billed as a blend of *Zelda* and *Mario* game styles. Ocean has one or two other surprises in store, too, including a cowboy-themed game from

Infogrames, and a helicopter title from simulation specialists Digital Image Design. With Seta's *Wild Choppers* unlikely ever to see the light of day, this could prove to be the definitive 'copter game. DID certainly have the pedigree to pull it off (even the military have been known to use their simulation code); it's just a question of when the notoriously slow developer can get the game finished.

Finally, there's also the possibility of Ocean sealing another publishing deal with an as-yet unnamed Japanese developer. If this comes off, we could see about 20 – yes, 20! – new N64 titles making it over to these shores in the near future.

N

Space Circus



GO! GO!

N



DMA Design



Having created a whole new game genre with *Lemmings*, DMA broke ties with publisher Psygnosis a couple of years back, preferring to concentrate on more innovative titles rather than come up with new adventures for the little green suicide freaks.

Uniracers was the result, a SNES title which somehow made the sight of single-wheeled bikes visually attractive. From there, DMA gained entry into the N64 Dream Team, and have been beavering away on *Body Harvest* for Nintendo ever since.

"*Body Harvest* has been close to completion several times, but Nintendo keep changing the focus of the game," says DMA's Bryan Baglow. "When we conceived the title, it was much more of a straightforward shoot-'em-up, but Nintendo thought it could be changed into something that's almost an RPG. So, while the engine is done and all the monsters and vehicles are in there, we're re-doing the levels and providing character interaction to give it a much

spanking new role-playing element. Sounds great, doesn't it?"

Even wilder, though, is *Silicon Valley*. "Because we're developing *Silicon Valley* for BMG rather than Nintendo, the design is much more internal," Bryan tells us. "The team leader, Jamie Bryan, is also the lead artist, and from the beginning he's had a very clear idea of how it should look." In fact, it looks something like a B-movie cartoon, N64 style. Something classic but not too cutesy is the aim. "You've got all these robotic animals who may look cute, but may just bite your head off," warns Bryan.

With an off-beat story which puts the player in charge of a roving computer chip, exploring space station *Silicon Valley* – complete with 2001-style corridors; desert levels, arctic levels and so on – in a bid to discover why it disappeared from the solar system, and why it's suddenly reappeared a thousand years later, the game revolves

of, a species of mouse that has wheels instead of legs. By working up through the chain (there are around 40 different species at the moment), different areas of the landscape can be



Silicon Valley



Body Harvest



Body Harvest

more strategic element."

When pushed for an estimated release date Bryan candidly admits, "It's a bit of mystery, because you know what Nintendo are like for quality control. They're the biggest company in the world, so they don't care about time scales so much. And of course we're happy to go along with them, because they know what they're doing."

All this means that gamers can now expect loads of vehicles, plenty of shoot-'em-up action, lots of impressive boss monsters and a

around your ability to assume control of Valley's various robotic species.

"*Silicon Valley* was a research station, so the place starts off with tiny nanobots which grow into more complex forms," explains Bryan.

"All the animals interact, and there's a definite food chain going on there. If you're near a more predatory animal, you need to fight or run away."

In gaming terms, this hierarchy of artificial lifeforms might mean that the player is in control of a mouse, but in order to get around more easily, needs to fight it out with, then take control

explored and new puzzles tackled.

Bryan: "You may need to become a dog to herd a sheep into an area, or a ram so they'll follow you. You've got to think about exploiting features of the landscape. You may have missed whole sections if you haven't been up in the air, or gone down into a little mouse-hole."

And just as some animals can fly (some very unlikely animals, at that), players can also assume the form of animals which take to the water. "The water is modelled dynamically", says Bryan, "so there are things like dams,

and sections which require water to be moved from one area to another. The landscape can always been interacted with in this kind of way."

With its mixture of fast action and free-form exploration, *Silicon Valley* has the potential to be one of next year's most original and individual games. As Bryan says, "What we're doing with all our titles is giving people toys to play with." And if that's not enough, two more games are already under discussion, to be published by DMA Design's new owners, Gremlin.



NEXT MONTH

The N64's all new, but the same names keep cropping up: *Starfox*; *Super Mario*, *Pilotwings* and *Mario Kart*. What makes Nintendo's classic games so enduring?

