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STALKING THE JAGUAR

VIDEOGAMES catches up with Atari producer James "Purple" Hampton to get the scoop on the upcoming *Alien vs. Predator* game for the Jaguar.

Video Games: Where did the *Alien vs. Predator* project originate, and what has been your involvement with the game?

Purple: I came to Atari from Lucasfilm, where I worked as a tester on *Monkey Island I and II*, the two *Star Wars* games for the NES and—among other things—a little-known game called *Night Shift*, which was developed by a company called Attention to Detail. I thought it was kind of amusing when I got here to discover that ATD also did *Cybermorph*, the first Jaguar game released!

When I arrived in October of '92, I was assigned to be the producer of *Alien vs. Predator*, which at the time was a Lynx game. As you know, Activision had a Super NES game called *Alien vs. Predator*, and Atari had acquired the rights to the AvP title through Activision. The Lynx people who had already started on the project (Images Software) had been told by Atari to follow the script of the Activision game, which was kind of a *Final Fight* clone, but I really didn't agree with that as a treatment of the characters. I was excited to be working with the Alien and Predator characters to begin with and I wanted a chance to get closer



to the motivations of the characters themselves.

As it happened, Images was happy with the idea of completely changing the script, so we both spent one week watching all of the *Alien* and *Predator* films, then started the month-long process of sending faxes back and forth with different ideas to try. Ultimately we came to the conclusion that the most interesting way of really representing the characters was to do it in the first person, with you being able to play as any one of the three species: A human, an Alien or a Predator.

Video Games: Around this time the Jaguar hardware was coming together. Did you then start to develop

the Jaguar version without really knowing what you were capable of doing with it?

Purple: No, the hardware had been pretty much developed by the time I got there. Of course, no one really knew exactly what was and was not possible on the Jaguar. To this day we're still finding out things; every week we seem to be saying, "Wow, we can do this?"

What we did know regarding AvP was that the Jaguar could do the first-person perspective with 3-D rendering really, really well. We continued along with the Lynx ver-



sion which we were trying to design around the ComLynx feature, the idea is to do it as a *FaceBall* type of game, where one person can play the Alien, one person can play the Predator, one person can play the Marine and they're all in the same maze hunting each other. There have been ups and downs with the Lynx game, but it's currently planned to be released about six weeks after AvP comes out for the Jaguar in June.

VideoGames: I understand that both Images and Rebellion—the developer of the Jaguar version—are based in England. What's it like to work with an overseas developer?





Purple: It wasn't until February of '93 that the Jaguar *AvP* contract was assigned to Rebellion, and that's when the project really started kicking into gear. Before that, the Lynx game was leading the way in terms of the direction the project was going to take, but when Rebellion came in they really got involved in the overall feel of the game, working with the art and so on. At first, their people had to spend a few months just learning the system and what it could and couldn't do. During that time, we went through art changes back and forth...like, we originally started with 256-color DPaint art screens and went through three different steps to get to the technique we are using now.

VideoGames: Which is?

Purple: Essentially, Rebellion has created models of the different creatures and they're doing stop-motion animation, frame by frame, for all of the different animation cycles of each character involved. The wall "tiles" are also physically being created and photographed; in fact, they're literally bathroom tiles with model parts and spray paint on them. Once they're converted into graphic data, they are essentially one-panel textures that are being applied to the game's 3-D polygon world.

It's really kind of bizarre. It's exciting, but at the same time you keep telling yourselves, "we can do more." I mean, why settle for 256 colors when you can have 65,000!

VideoGames: I've heard some interesting things about the data compression that *AvP* uses, and how the compression technology is one of the things that really sets the Jaguar apart from the 16-bit game systems. Can you elaborate on this?

Purple: In essence, the Jaguar—because of the five different processors in it—is hyper-fast; it has enough processors to do different things while you're busy doing other things, such as decompressing huge files in game time or in real time. That, in turn, enables you to store a lot of better-looking images in a smaller

space. A file with 65,000 colors in it is normally huge; it would take either a long time to draw on the screen or—worse yet—it would take a huge amount of room to store on a cartridge. But in *AvP*, we've had no trouble storing these images and decompressing them on the fly. We're using different compression ratios depending on what the image is and what kind of clarity value it really needs to have, like, some of the less-detailed wall panels in *AvP* are using a 10:1 or even 14:1 compression ratio. That's for a low-detail tile, maybe a floor panel or one of the white MedLab walls. On the lower end, some of the more detailed characters use 3:1 or 4:1 compression, which is still a significant value considering how long it used to take to do that sort of thing.

The size of the final cartridge will be 16 megabits, but we're estimating that there's at least 125 megabits of information compressed into the game; it's pretty sizable.

VideoGames: Are there any limitations in terms of how many Aliens you can have on the screen at one time?

Purple: We haven't found any yet. It's exciting; we thought there might have been a problem, but it's cooking right along.

VideoGames: That's encouraging. Hey, I have to ask: Where'd you get the nickname Purple?

Purple: Well, when you start working at Lucasfilm—in the "tester from hell" department—you have two seconds to assign yourself a name, otherwise the guys will assign one for you. I was given the name Purple because I was wearing purple socks, I had a purple streak in my hair and I was driving a purple modified Saab with purple glasses on.

