

The making of...

Alien Vs Predator

Today, the Kingsley brothers are as interested in making movies as videogames. Ten years ago, they were content with making games based on movies

Among Oxford University's many contributions to British cultural life, perhaps the least recognised are its offerings to videogame development. Although Cambridge might have given the world *Elite* (and, indeed, Steven Poole), it's a little-known fact that various Oxford graduates have made their own valuable contributions to the world of gaming. Graduates such as Free Radical's David Doak, for example, who was immortalised during his time at Rare as GoldenEye's Doctor Doak; or Chris and Jason Kingsley, founders of

Original format: Jaguar

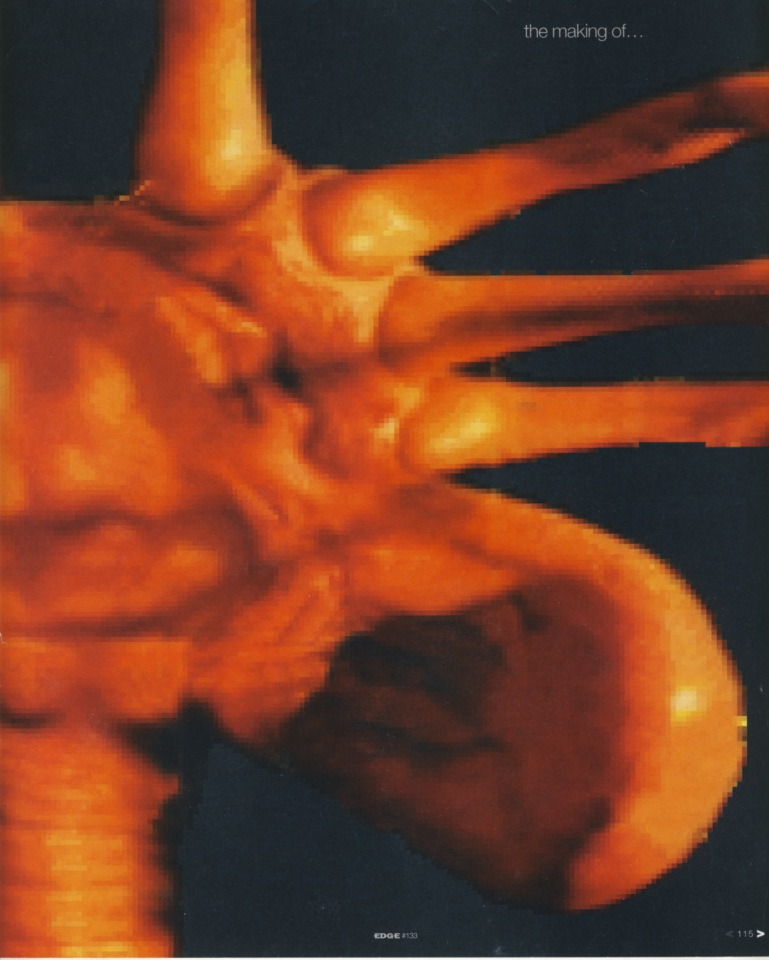
Publisher: Atari

Developer: Rebellion

Origin: UK

Original release date: 1994

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Unlike earlier videogames based on the 'Alien' and 'Predator' licenses, *AVP* dispensed with the side-scrolling conventions

Rebellion. Having acquired cult sci-fi comic '2000AD' a couple of years after the Kingsleys, still based in Oxford, currently employ some 60 people across operations that encompass videogames, comic books and even movie development.

It all started in rather more humble circumstances when Rebellion was set up in order to create a launch title for the Atari Jaguar. *Alien Vs Predator* never quite made that launch slot, but the fact that 84 per cent of Jaguar owners bought the game would appear to suggest that it was worth the wait.

While Chris had been focusing on completing a DPhil in chemistry his brother, Jason, had somehow managed to find the time to build up the sort of varied CV that you'd expect from an institution that regularly turns out captains of industry and British prime ministers.

After completing his degree in zoology, Jason had managed to write a few children's books, do some fashion photography in London and work as a camera assistant on the odd music video. He'd also been involved in making several videogames, such as *Blade Warrior* for Mimosoft's Imageworks label, isometric adventure *Murder* for

US Gold, shooter *Better Dead than Alien* and *Hunt for Red October* from Oxford Digital.

It was with this experience that the brothers decided to pitch themselves to Atari, putting together a demo of their 3D work with a tiny team of other freelancers. "Chris and I were working from our student basement," points out Jason Kingsley. "The only natural light had to travel down a coal hole before it could be seen – ideal conditions to see the screen, though, and almost an *AVP* environment in itself. When we got the deal we had to set up the company and get going pretty fast."

For such a relatively small and inexperienced team, the task that they'd set themselves was a considerable one: "Nobody had ever built this sort of title before. There were no control standards, no assumed knowledge, the Jaguar was



Along with *Tempest*, *AVP* became one of the most popular games on Jaguar

after some time we managed to convince them we could do a fully texture-mapped, 16bit, photographic-quality firstperson shooter in 2.5D, sort of raytraced, but with the walls staying vertical."

It was a brave design decision. At the time, the firstperson shooter had yet to establish itself. *Id's* *Wolfenstein 3D* had been available to those with high-end PCs, but *Doom* had yet to appear and the subsequent blossoming of the genre was just a distant dream. An equally

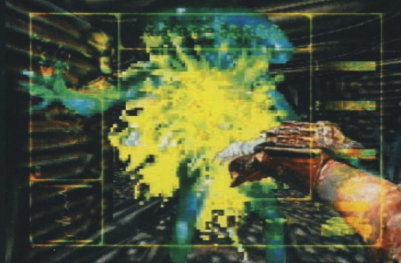
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brave decision was to give players the opportunity to play the bad guy, since they could choose to take on the role of marine, *Predator* or *Alien*. Consequently, *AVP* contained a significant degree of variety and a surprising narrative complexity. Set on a colonial marine training base infested with Aliens, there were three goals: as a marine, to destroy the base and escape before it blows; as an Alien, to rescue the queen; and, as a Predator, to acquire honour by killing the Alien queen.

While the marine missions would be readily identifiable to anyone familiar with today's narrative-based FPS titles, it's worth noting that, at the time, this was groundbreaking design, enhanced by a powerful survival horror sensibility that still felt fresh when it came to characterise much later titles such as *Alien: Resurrection*. It's an even more sizeable achievement when you

even want a 3D title. Capcom's coin-op version of *Alien Vs Predator* (which inspired a 2D 16bit rendition) gave players a chance to play as a marine or Predator against the Aliens in a fairly straightforward scrolling beat 'em up. It was this sort of title that was initially pencilled in: "They wanted a scrolling fighter like *Double Dragon*," explains Kingsley. "But

brave decision was to give players the opportunity to play the bad guy, since they could choose to take on the role of marine, *Predator* or *Alien*. Consequently, *AVP* contained a significant degree of variety and a surprising narrative complexity. Set on a colonial marine training base infested with Aliens, there were three goals: as a marine, to destroy the base and escape before it blows; as an Alien, to rescue the queen; and, as a Predator, to acquire honour by killing the Alien queen.



Even now, ten years after release, the Kingsleys still receive unsolicited emails and letters from *AVP* fans saying how great the game was. Atari's test department lent a hand to balance the difficulty level of the game.

consider that it was just one of three types of gameplay on offer. Deft design touches differentiated the other sections, such as the ability to cocoon enemies while an Alien, and to take over these new Aliens should you die – a neat way of emphasising their hive consciousness.

Predators, meanwhile, acquired better weapons according to how 'honourable' their kills were. And all the while, an unremittingly tense atmosphere was maintained by the lack of a musical score.

Underlying this sophisticated design were some remarkably old-fashioned processes rubbing shoulders with totally radical ones. "We designed the levels initially using grid-based graph paper and coloured pens," confirms Kingsley. "However, we used a totally revolutionary technique to create the sprites – to get them photorealistic. They were created by building and photographing models of the alien or predator, scanning the resulting 35mm prints and cutting them out in Deluxe Paint to create the six- or eight-frame animations of the sprites. For the marines we contacted a bloke who had bought one of the marine costumes from the film and photographed him in a range of poses. Wall panels were built on 9cm-by-9cm bits of cardboard, we photographed them and scanned them into the game. There was a lot of hands-on building of real wall textures in those days, real 'Blue Peter' development and none of your fancy graphics packages! It gave the game a photorealistic look that still works today. I've still got some of those panels somewhere too..."

The result was a game that's still remembered fondly today. Indeed, although the movie people gave Rebellion no input during development, according to Kingsley, they said that the finished product was the best game ever made from any of their licences. "When we look back at the game, we are still amazed at the level of technical and gameplay innovation that we managed to achieve," he continues. "Up to that point, I don't think I can recall a game that had much texture-mapping, let alone making the whole thing fully texture-mapped. Also, we are really proud of the photorealistic look – it took others several years to get anything close. There were lots of other great things too, but for me the icing on the cake was the Predator's very cool vision modes. Nobody had ever made a game like this before, even on PC, so the whole thing was new territory, we had nothing to build from or compare ourselves to."

Perhaps unsurprisingly, though, the game found itself tied to the fate of the Jaguar. It was undoubtedly the console's killer app, selling to a vast majority of the user base, but it was deprived of the broader audience of a console like the PlayStation. "I wonder what we would be doing now if the game had been the killer app on the PSone," agrees Kingsley. "But it was Rebellion's first born, and we have no regrets. The Jaguar was a great machine to write for, and Atari was, of course, one of the creators of the videogame business, so it was a great honour to be involved with them."

Indeed, it was undeniably Alien Vs Predator that set Rebellion on



"One programmer came and went quite quickly, as he just couldn't do the maths," remembers Kingsley. "The game is fondly remembered enough for him to still be claiming to have been 'lead' on the project, though!"

course for its eventual cross-media mini-empire: "It was our starting point and gave us the confidence to go on from there. We learned a lot about scheduling, about feature creep, and subsequently learned that we still had a load more learning to do. Everyone has to start somewhere and it was a great place to begin."

It was no surprise, then, when the Kingsleys returned to the licence to create an equally ambitious title for the PC, Alien Vs Predator, five years later... **E**



"We got quite a lot of input from Atari, mostly. 'You guys can program for Jaguar, we've got a new team starting and we need you to tell them how it works,'" recalls Kingsley.