

THE MAKING OF... NIGHT TRAP

IN THE KNOW

- PUBLISHER: SEGA/DIGITAL PICTURES
- DEVELOPER: DIGITAL PICTURES/AXLON/HASBRO
- RELEASED: 1992 (MEGA-CD)
- PLATFORM: MEGA-CD, 3DO, SEGA 32X CD, PC CD-ROM, HASBRO NEMO (UNRELEASED)
- GENRE: INTERACTIVE MOVIE
- EXPECT TO PAY: £10+

Grainy video, bad acting, scantily clad females and blood-sucking assailants (not to mention the involvement of Atari founder Nolan Bushnell); let's face it, *Night Trap* has it all. **DAMIEN MCFERRAN** speaks to the man behind the video nasty that had everyone's chins wagging in the early Nineties - including those of the US senate



Ever since its inception the videogame industry and controversy have gone hand in hand. *Custer's Revenge*, *Death Race*, *Grand Theft Auto*, *Sam Fox's Strip Poker*... these titles and many more like them have secured their position in the history books by stirring up trouble, but few games have instigated the kind of furore that results in the industry-wide adoption of a ratings classification system. When it comes to notorious videogames, *Night Trap* is in a league of its own - the real irony being that its iniquitous status as highly subversive 'video nasty' is almost entirely undeserved.

Creator Rob Fulop is a man whose name might be familiar to Atari addicts - he's the person responsible for programming many excellent domestic conversions of the company's most successful coin-op hits. "My first commercial release was *Night Driver*, followed by a version of *Space Invaders* for the Atari 400/800 Personal Computer," he recalls. Annoyed by Atari's refusal to credit its game designers, Fulop helped establish publisher Imagic. *Demon Attack* and *Cosmic Ark* soon followed, both released on his former employer's 2600 hardware and both shifting an impressive volume of units at retail. Imagic was eventually sunk by the videogame crash of the Eighties and Fulop joined Atari founder Nolan Bushnell's new company Axlon. The firm was working on an innovative entertainment system codenamed 'Project NEMO' (which apparently stood for 'Never Ever Mention Outside') that used VHS technology to create movie-like experiences far more visually arresting than anything available at the time. "The NEMO system allowed multiple tracks of video to run simultaneously from a consumer tape

deck," explains Fulop. "Still frames of the video were interleaved together, sort of like shuffled playing cards, and the hardware would freeze selected frames for a few milliseconds until the next frame of that track came off the tape."

A prototype game called *Scene Of The Crime* was produced in order to demonstrate what this potentially groundbreaking system was capable of; this short demo would essentially serve as the blueprint for *Night Trap*. "The main difference was that *Scene Of The Crime* was a five-minute demo, whereas *Night Trap* was a full game," comments Fulop. "Also, there were no 'traps' in *Scene Of The Crime*. Instead, players merely followed suspicious characters around a house trying to find who stole the money." As an exhibition of what NEMO could do, *Scene Of The Crime* clearly worked: it was shown to executives at toy giant Hasbro in 1986 and convinced the company to pick up the system for retail.

Night Trap's production schedule was part movie shoot, part videogame programming. "It was shot in 16 days in 1987 and took another few months to edit into the separate tracks," recalls Fulop. "The software was developed concurrently. I think, all told, the game took about six months to get working." Because Fulop and his team were working with pioneering technology, they soon discovered that old-fashioned development methods didn't always work. "With a traditional game, the author can diddle to their heart's content



■ [32X] Scantily clad girls, poor acting, and a nonsensical plot. Why wouldn't you want to play *Night Trap*?

with all the on-screen elements, often right up until the game is completed," he says. "This process is referred to as 'tweaking' and is what makes a good game work so well. With a 'moviegame' like *Night Trap*, the author has practically no 'tweaking' ability as all the assets they have to work with are handed over as a video stream; there is no way to go back and insert a new scene or change the timing of when an actor comes into view. The game must be designed as a script and the first time the game is played is much later; at that point it's too late to make significant changes."

Indeed, one of the key differences that separates *Night Trap* from games



■ To promote the PC version, this deliberately controversial advert appeared in magazines. Ironically, it was gorier than the game itself.

“IT WAS SHOT IN 16 DAYS IN 1987 AND TOOK ANOTHER FEW MONTHS TO EDIT”

■ [Mega-CD] Some of the acting on display in this game is truly painful to watch, but it all adds to the campy feel that has made *Night Trap* a cult classic.



■ [3DO] If you needed proof that this is a product of the Eighties, check out those gnarly hairstyles.



DEVELOPER HIGHLIGHTS

DEMON ATTACK
SYSTEM: ATARI 2600
YEAR: 1982

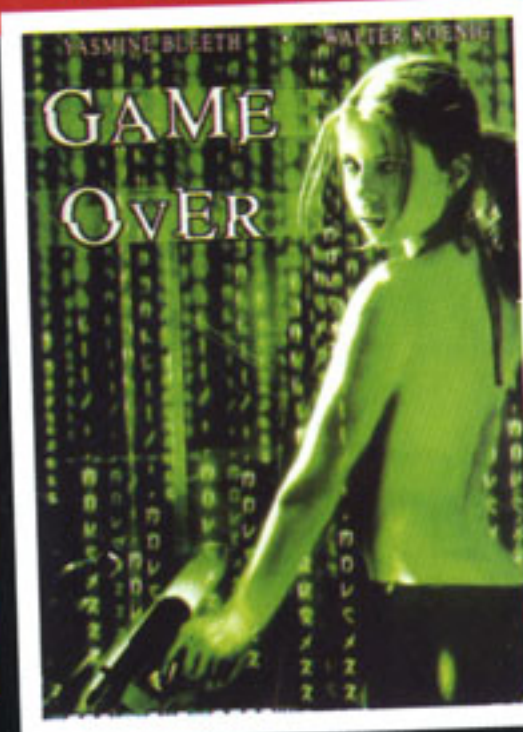
MAX MAGIC
SYSTEM: PHILLIPS CD-I
YEAR: 1996

DOGZ (PICTURED)
SYSTEM: PC
YEAR: 1997



THE MAKING OF... NIGHT TRAP

MAKING MOVIES



TOM ZITO BUILT his Digital Pictures empire on the success of *Night Trap* and went on to become something of a figurehead for FMV gaming in the early Nineties; notable titles include *Ground Zero Texas*, *Corpse Killer*, *Quarterback Attack* and *Supreme Warrior*. In an ironic twist, footage from several Digital Pictures games was spliced together to create 35 minutes of action for the 2003 straight-to-DVD release *Game Over* (aka *Maximum Surge Movie*), in which the central protagonist must play various videogames in order to save humanity. The asinine plot at least gives some justification for the hilariously unconnected nature of the action but sadly doesn't clarify why the video quality varies from 'passable' to 'barely VHS' standard. To top it all off, former *Baywatch* beauty Yasmine Bleeth is given top billing despite the fact that she only appears during the segments lifted directly from Digital Pictures' most auspicious FMV 'moviegame', *Maximum Surge* – which never actually saw commercial release.



• [32X] Each room in the house has a trap that you can use to ensnare the evil Augers trying to harm the girls – but you have to be in the right place at the right time to activate them.

“I THOUGHT THE WHOLE WITCH-HUNT WAS RIDICULOUS AND WITHOUT MERIT”



• Does anyone else feel that the US boxes Sega made were ugly as hell?

• [3D0] *Night Trap* apparently encouraged violence against women; despite the fact you're actually rescuing them.



of the same era is the fact that it uses real actors instead of sprites as its protagonists. However, for the thespians in question, the groundbreaking nature of the project was largely lost on them. “The actors knew it was an interactive game, but their day-to-day process was identical to making a movie or TV show,” recalls Fulop. “They came on set, rehearsed their lines, and performed as directed. There were a few times they needed to work out careful timing of when they entered and left the scene, but such was coordinated by other people on the set.”

Understandably, the status of the cast in question wasn't exactly A-list. “Interactive ‘moviegames’ were

populated by performers either on their way ‘up’ or on their way ‘down’ the Hollywood ladder; nobody aspired to appear in a ‘moviegame!’” chuckles Fulop. Arguably the most famous person to be involved was Dana Plato, notable for her work on the US sitcom *Diff'rent Strokes*, in which she had starred from 1978 until its eventual cancellation in 1986. The termination of the show – coupled with Plato's personal problems with drugs and alcohol – resulted in her career adopting a distinctly downward trajectory. *Night Trap* was just one of the many dubious projects that she became involved with. “Dana was fine to work with at first, very professional. She needed the work,” remembers Fulop. “Later she became more problematic; she'd come late and never wanted to rehearse. Her doing this project was obviously a step down from her previous popularity and she didn't make a great deal of effort to hide this fact.”

With the footage in the can and the programming complete, *Night Trap* was readied for launch alongside another NEMO ‘moviegame’ called *Sewer Shark*. However, just before NEMO was about to be officially launched at the start of 1989, the worst happened – Hasbro pulled the plug. The company cited the high cost of the hardware (thought to be in the region of around \$300) as the reason for the decision and although *Sewer Shark* and *Night Trap* had eaten through an combined budget of approximately \$4.5 million (making them two of the most expensive

videogames of the era), it looked as though they would never see the light of day. Fulop walked away disappointed but essentially unfazed by the entire affair. He went on to form PF.Magic (which would later become famous for creating the bestselling *Petz* virtual pet simulation series) and allowed Project NEMO to fade into memory.

However, *Night Trap* refused to pass quietly into obscurity and was given a second lease of life thanks to Tom Zito. “Zito was the General Manager of the Hasbro Interactive unit based in California,” explains Fulop. “He was the executive producer of both *Night Trap* and *Sewer Shark* and was my supervisor during production of both titles.” When the Hasbro deal turned sour, Zito quickly purchased all the material related to the two abandoned games and founded his own company, called Digital Pictures. Rumour has it that Zito had originally hoped to bring the two games to the Super Nintendo CD-ROM unit that was being developed in conjunction with Sony, but when Nintendo's add-on failed to materialise he decided to sign up with Sega and launch on the company's Mega-CD system instead. *Night Trap* had made the transition from VHS to CD-ROM and was pushed out onto store shelves in 1992 (five years after it was originally created), upon which it instantly became embroiled in one of the most controversial chapters in the history of videogames.

The following year a joint US Senate Judiciary and Government Affairs Committee held a hearing on the sticky subject of videogame violence. Senator Joseph Lieberman attacked *Night Trap* with the same vitriol usually reserved for rapists and murderers, claiming that it promoted a “culture of carnage” and was “a disgusting, offensive game that



• [32x] Games could get surprisingly tense, especially as you watched the Augers go about their business.

should not be shown to civilisation.” The other title under scrutiny was Midway's gory fighter *Mortal Kombat* – a fact that irks Fulop even to this day. “It was annoying to hear *Night Trap* compared to *Mortal Kombat* – a game featuring one character ripping the heart out of their defeated opponent's chest,” admits Fulop. “The most graphic scene in *Night Trap* involved two hooded thugs dragging their victim off camera.”

In a move that was especially humiliating for Sega, Nintendo's chairman Howard Lincoln was asked to give his opinion on the uproar. “Lincoln testified in front of the Senate, stating *Night Trap* would never appear on a Nintendo system because it did not pass their guidelines,” Fulop explains. “He was referring obviously to the technical guidelines – the game would not run on the Nintendo system due to lack of CD-ROM – but he made it sound as if the game was unworthy of Nintendo's moral standards.” Nintendo's sanctimonious stance was a deliberate move to distance itself from the scandal and make its bitter rival Sega look bad, but this self-righteousness didn't last

• Rob Fulop today



long. “Nintendo's subsequent licensing of *Mortal Kombat* on the SNES was a complete hypocrisy,” Fulop exclaims.

This hullabaloo ensured that *Night Trap* became infamous for its supposedly objectionable content and its creator is still clearly stinging from the assault even today. “I thought the whole witch-hunt was ridiculous and totally without merit,” Fulop recalls. “I was very embarrassed that something I had made was being torn apart like that. Many people were getting the complete wrong idea about the game.” Indeed, Lieberman's assertion that *Night Trap* somehow encouraged violence against women was laughably ill-informed – as anyone who has played the game will know, the aim is to save the female characters, rather than delight in their demise. It speaks volumes that Lieberman himself has since admitted that he never actually played the game. “There is no easier target than pop culture for a politician who wants to be seen as looking out for the common good,” says Fulop with a wry smile. However, the veteran developer admits that one good thing did come out of all the fuss. “The controversy around *Night Trap* led directly to the establishment of a rating system for games,” he states. “I think it made sense. Violent or potentially disturbing games should be labelled as such, because a lot of grandparents buy these games for their grandkids, and don't really have a clue as to what they are buying.” The Entertainment Software Ratings Board (or ‘ESRB’) was founded in 1994 and is still running today.

Having been instrumental in developing the concept of ‘FMV gaming’ (or ‘moviegaming’ as Fulop likes to call it), does he feel that the negative critical reaction to *Night Trap* – and FMV games in general – was warranted? “Comparing *Night Trap* to a traditional videogame



• [Mega-CD] Every teenage boy wants to view girls in their nighties.

is like comparing *American Idol* to *Star Wars*,” he says. “They are two totally different experiences offered on different platforms to different audiences. Nobody intended *Night Trap* to hold up to a traditional game. The intent of the ‘moviegame’ genre was to go after the 95 per cent of the people in the world who don't play traditional videogames. So throwing rocks at such a thing and claiming that the gameplay doesn't hold up compared to *Doom* is silly. That said, we hardly created a breakthrough form of interactive entertainment. We took a shot, it didn't go very far, end of story. But we never for one second thought we were making something that should be compared to a real videogame. A game reviewer complaining that *Night Trap* isn't a fun enough game is like a film critic complaining that a game show doesn't have enough action scenes.”

Time may not have been particularly kind to *Night Trap* and FMV gaming in general, but Fulop is still pleased with what was achieved all those years ago. “I'm most proud that we got it to work at all and that we managed to put out a truly novel game format, something that nobody had ever played before,” he beams. Although ‘moviegames’ have all but been forgotten as 3D graphics technology has advanced and become ever more realistic, Fulop isn't convinced that it's an entirely dead medium yet. “I think interactive movies haven't reached a large enough audience,” he comments. “As long as they are designed to appeal primarily to gamers, there is obviously no comparison; the sheer number of times one can interact meaningfully with a ‘moviegame’ pales to the continuous interaction offered by something like *Grand Theft Auto*. That said, I still maintain that there exists a huge potential market for FMV entertainment that is not so ‘gamelike.’”



DANA PLATO 1964-1999

Dana Plato is undoubtedly the most famous face in *Night Trap*'s cast of otherwise unknown actors, but she's a lot less well known here in the UK than she is in the US. Her involvement with Fulop's game was something of a low point in her career, but it was by no means her professional nadir. Following several breast augmentations, a spread in *Playboy* magazine and appearances in soft porn movies, she tragically died in May 1999 from an overdose of prescription medication; the official reason was ruled to be suicide, but many close friends insist it was an accidental death. Despite the problems experienced during the filming of *Night Trap*, Fulop still has a good word to say about the late actress: “Obviously I was very sad to hear about Dana; she had a very fun spirit and had a great sense of humour. She deserved better.”