

THE MAKING OF...

LANDS

OF LORE

THE MAKING OF: LANDS OF LORE SERIES

Before it became known as the world's premier RTS creator, Westwood Studios was primarily concerned with pointy-eared elves and cantankerous witches. Join Damien McFerran as he equips his +1 leather codpiece and charts a course for Gladstone Castle

The now-defunct Westwood Studios is probably best known for producing the insanely popular *Command & Conquer* series, but the fact the company was also one of the leading lights in the realm of adventure games is often overlooked. Back in the early-Nineties, the Las Vegas-based developer produced a series of role-playing titles for SSI under the *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* banner.

After achieving considerable success with two superb *Eye Of The Beholder* games, Westwood was acquired by Virgin Interactive. The risky decision was made to shed the lucrative but ultimately restrictive *AD&D* licence and focus on creating a fresh property. "I'm sure this decision was made by Brett Sperry and Louis Castle," says Rick Gush, who worked as a producer on the *Lands Of Lore* series and was also responsible for the storyline. He continues: "Brett was particularly aware of the benefits of creating a series of brands and I think creating their own new brand was the best move towards both promotion and self-determination for the studio." As Joseph Hewitt, who worked as an artist at Westwood during this time, explains: "Now that we were a publisher, we wanted to develop our own properties rather than work on games for another publisher to make money out of."

With two entries in the critically acclaimed *Eye Of The Beholder* series under its belt, Westwood had both the game engine and the experience

to attempt such a feat, but creating an entire fantasy universe from scratch wasn't going to be an easy task. Thankfully the studio was home to some supremely talented individuals and work soon began in earnest. "I think Phil Gorrow was the first to propose *Lands Of Lore* design ideas," recalls Gush, who didn't join the company until after production had commenced. "Gorrow and his crew had the basic concepts in place. Although the game was his baby, I think Phil was happy to let someone else continue with the story and game map in order that he could concentrate on the new engine. A few months after I arrived, we hired Bill Crum, who was a friend of Phil's. Bill became the official designer and I took the title of producer. I really enjoyed working with Phil and then Bill on the broad design, but then they did all the dirty work of actually making sure the game worked."

Westwood had a fairly grand scheme in mind for its new franchise and the intention was clearly to better *Eye Of The Beholder 2* in every regard. "It was basically about evolving the game, increasing the depth of story, pushing game concepts and

trying to make another really fun title, only this time with all our own rules," explains Hewitt. Another key concern was making the game as accessible as possible to ensure it could reach the widest audience. "Brett was big on making the game more user-friendly," he continues. "The *AD&D* licence came with a lot of rules, restrictions and built-in assumptions of what you had to have. *AD&D* was a great pencil-and-paper game, but a lot of the way it was developed had to do with the fact it was a pencil-and-paper game."

After toiling away on so many *AD&D* games, the Westwood team were aware of how limiting the ruleset could be and how it could negatively affect game design. "There were so many things that snagged the design where we had to do odd things. We were pushing square pegs into round holes to make a fun computer game," elaborates Hewitt. "For example, how realistic was it to be camping in the hallway of the dungeon for weeks while everybody healed up and re-memorised spells? In a tabletop game you were role-playing the whole thing out over pizza and soda with a group of friends – *AD&D* was balanced

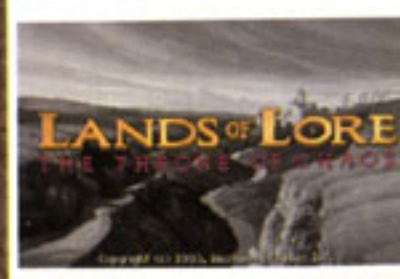
In Memory Of Rick Parks



Though fans may have been disappointed that Westwood used traditional 2D graphics for the first game in the series, they were of such high quality that it was hailed a masterpiece regardless. This standard of graphical brilliance was down to lead artist Rick Parks, who passed away in 1996. "Rick was the aesthetic soul of Westwood," says Gush. "We were all a bit in awe of his artistic capacities, but he was just one of the guys and really enjoyed participating in all the office hilarity. Although I was not a close friend of his, Rick's passing hit me hard, and I was motivated to make some major changes in my own life." Hewitt also recalls Parks with great affection. "We liked to pick on Rick and call him the 'centre of the universe,'" he says. "He was one of the greatest people I've ever had the pleasure to meet, let alone work with and learn from. We pushed ourselves harder to just try and be as good as he was."

IN THE KNOW

- PUBLISHER: VIRGIN INTERACTIVE/ELECTRONIC ARTS
- DEVELOPER: WESTWOOD STUDIOS
- PLATFORM: PC
- RELEASED: 1993 (LOL1), 1997 (LOL2), 1999 (LOL3)
- GENRE: ROLE-PLAYING ADVENTURE
- EXPECT TO PAY: £5+



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DEVELOPER HIGHLIGHTS
COMMAND & CONQUER
 SYSTEM: VARIOUS
 YEAR: 1995
LEGEND OF KYRANDIA
 SYSTEM: VARIOUS
 YEAR: 1992



[PC] The second game employed live actors, with varying degrees of success.



and designed around that. Experience progression was a really big pain with the AD&D system. We had to hide places in the game where we could secretly give you experience points for just walking over a spot on the map to make sure you kept up with the progression curve. Again, what you get from role-playing with friends is very different than what you want from a computer game.”

The desire to do things differently affected every aspect of the game design, including the in-game characterisation. “One of the major things that got on Brett’s nerves was character creation,” says Hewitt. “With AD&D you had to spend all that time creating a character

with all these stats whose effect in the game you hadn’t yet been taught. Imagine someone who’d never played AD&D suddenly getting tossed all those things along with some esoteric dice-rolling number system. They’d be lost and afraid of creating a gimped character that wouldn’t be capable of completing the game and wouldn’t be fun. Brett has us put in simple character creation: you picked one of four pre-made characters and that was it.”

Things progressed well and the Westwood team were aware they were creating something special. However, during development an event occurred that radically altered the playing field in the first-person RPG arena: Origin released *Ultima Underworld: The Stygian Abyss*. It was the first title to utilise true 3D graphics and essentially made the old-fashion flick-screen adventures – such as *Eye Of The Beholder* and *Dungeon Master* – look basic in comparison. However, Westwood was too far into development to retool the 2D *Lands Of Lore* engine. “By the time *Ultima Underworld* and the early FPS games started to come out we had to address the fact that the single step ‘fake’ 3D world tech was dated,” says Hewitt. “But we also knew what it would mean to try and create new technology. That’s why we stayed with the 2D engine but put a lot of effort into polishing it up as much as possible. The ‘blurred step and turn’ was introduced to give the game that smooth 3D feel.”

One area in

which *Lands Of Lore* was unquestionably innovative was its use of CD-ROM technology. It was one of the first Westwood games to utilise the shiny plastic disc that went on to revolutionise the industry. However, the storage space offered by this exciting new medium was only used to contain speech, some of which was supplied by thespian and part-time USS Enterprise captain Patrick Stewart. “This was at a time in the industry when CDs were still the up-and-coming new thing,” recalls Hewitt. “Releasing CD versions that added little beyond speech was common. But that was the industry taking the time to learn and develop tools for it and figure it out.”

Stewart was a consummate professional during his brief time with the Westwood team. “At the recording in Hollywood I remember that we were really impressed with how professional Patrick was,” recalls Gush. “We had spent \$30,000 for three hours of his time, so we were worried about all the inevitable delays at the studio, but in the end he finished everything with time to spare. As the writer of the dialogue, I was concerned that the context of the lines would not always be clear, but once he started reading, it was obvious that he’d give us some wonderful stuff.” Working with such a famous actor had other, somewhat unexpected benefits. “We got a cardboard cutout of him dressed in his *Star Trek* uniform out of the deal,” chuckles Hewitt. “For years it was common to be walking through the halls of Westwood to find him peering out from behind the snack machine, hanging upside down from an air-conditioner vent or even sitting at your desk.”

Upon its release in 1993 the game was met with critical and commercial acclaim. It was inevitable that a sequel would be put into production. *Lands Of Lore 2: Guardians Of Destiny* boldly took the series into the realm of 3D graphics, but it wasn’t an entirely smooth ride. “Moving from 2D to 3D was a bloody, hard-fought process,” comments Gush. “Rick Parks had some experience with Lightwave, but none of the other

Begone, Foul Bug

No game is perfect, and *Lands Of Lore* is no exception. It contains a game-breaking bug that doesn’t become apparent until the player is tantalisingly near to the end of the game. “There’s a scene where one of the female characters shows up and asks for her key back,” explains Hewitt. “It’s really the main antagonist Scotia in disguise, but it’s pretty obvious if I remember correctly. You refuse and she drops her shape-shift disguise and you have to fight a lizard or something while she flies off. Unfortunately, if you happened to fall for Scotia’s trick and gave her the key, you never got it back. It was supposed to be in a room in the final level, but somehow we all missed it and never tested that. We got a letter from some guy who had lost his key and we had to have him mail us a floppy with his save game so we could edit it to give him the key so he could finish the game.”



[PC] The sumptuous 2D artwork of the first *Lands Of Lore* still looks amazing today.

“I still get regular fan mail from folks wanting to talk about the game”

RICK GUSH

artists did at that early point. I’m not very good at screaming at people and giving ultimatums, but Brett forced me to be very hard with the artists as they moved towards mastering 3DStudio.” The production of the second game wasn’t helped by the fact that Westwood had another project in the pipeline, which was sucking away resources and attention from the *Lands Of Lore* sequel. “The whole unspoken purpose of the *Lands Of Lore* series by this time was to keep product in the Virgin pipeline while Brett worked on his masterpiece, which was the next evolution of he and Joe Bostic’s real-time strategy ideas,” explains Gush. “We cut corners all over the place and produced the game not as an independent piece of art, but more to the timetable that would best help keep the pressure off the as-yet-unnamed *Command & Conquer*, which had been in a sort of pre-development for several years.” Despite the rough nature of the

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[PC] *Lands Of Lore*’s protagonist, Luther, meets the Draracle, a character whose presence is felt in all three titles.



Rick Gush: has spade, will travel.



[PC] The third game was released just as 3D graphics cards were starting to take hold, but still looked pretty rough when compared to the 2D beauty of the first title.

3D visuals and the hurried development schedule, Gush is happy with what was achieved with the second game. “I still get regular fan mail from folks wanting to talk about the game. In general, even with the visual problems, lots of people seem to like the second in the series best. I know for me it was by far the most fun one to make.”

The genesis of the third – and so far, final – *Lands Of Lore* instalment was even more painful. Ironically, this was down to Westwood’s newfound success thanks to a certain RTS game. “I’m happy to have survived the corporate idiocy that descended on Westwood after *Command & Conquer* was such a hit,” says Gush with a wry smile. “I think Westwood grossed something like \$120 million in 1998. At the time we had 105 employees in the new office complex and we were swamped with orders and counter-orders from various LA-based prima donnas, marketing producers and vice presidents.” This corporate upheaval had a de-stabilising effect on the already beleaguered *Lands Of Lore* team. “By the time we were about three quarters done with the game, we all knew in our hearts that *Lands Of Lore* was finished,” laments Gush. “The third game’s development limped to a conclusion,

somewhat like the effort of a gritty football team that was being beaten by a much better team – the better team, in this case, was *Command & Conquer*. We did a good workmanlike job, but I don’t think anybody thought that working on the game was the crowning glory of their career and the whole thing was so tainted with erratic and imperious executive directives that nobody felt extremely personal or possessive about the game. The later official notification of the cancellation of the series, after Westwood had been purchased by EA, didn’t really surprise anyone. I left Westwood not long after *Lands Of Lore 3* was finished.”

It is rumoured that the series was imagined as an eight-part story, but it looks as if we’ll never see the other five chapters. “We did fiddle around with a few ideas for a fourth game after the third was published, but mostly just for something to do while the studio politics were resolved,” admits Gush. “Not only is there no chance EA will continue *Lands Of Lore*, they aren’t interested in co-operating or communicating with the several fan developing groups in Europe that are slowly trying to produce a new episode. *Lands Of Lore* just doesn’t fit in EA’s line-up any more.”