

# THE MAKING OF...

# THE IMMORTAL



Here at **Retro Gamer** we've always considered it a delicious irony that the main character in *The Immortal* meets a sticky end in a variety of particularly gruesome ways. Damien McFerran caught up with creator Will Harvey and thanks to the Dust of Compliance, convinced him to spill the beans on this underrated action adventure

**E**ver done something on the spur of the moment and found yourself in a tight squeeze as a result? Will Harvey certainly has. Back in his high school days he studied computer programming and when the teacher enquired if anyone in the class knew about Assembly language, Harvey keenly thrust his

hand skywards despite the exact opposite being true. The youngster was perturbed to discover that this moment of irrational impulsiveness had resulted in him receiving the dubious honour of putting together a class presentation about the aforementioned programming language the following day. "I learned a lot about Assembly that night, I can

tell you." chuckles Harvey today, older and thankfully much wiser. However, this one, fleeting moment of barefaced dishonesty had fateful repercussions and ultimately set him on the road to videogame stardom.

Having unwittingly exposed himself to the questionable joys of Assembly programming, Harvey discovered that

► One wrong step and you're worm food. Dof!

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he had become curiously hooked and therefore continued to expand his knowledge long after the infamous class presentation had been and gone. "At 15 I wrote a game called *Lancaster* for the Apple II" he vividly recalls. This rather basic *Space Invaders* clone was completed in 1982, and it was the need for musical accompaniment that led effortlessly onto Harvey's next project: "I required music for *Lancaster*, so in 1984 I wrote *Music Construction Set*." This proved to be his breakthrough release – a glorious mixture of entertainment and education, which allowed users to learn the basics of musical notation. Astonishingly, Harvey was a tender 15 years of age when he began work on this sizable hit. Electronic Arts subsequently picked it up for publication and quickly ported the game to other popular platforms of the era. In keeping with its



► Although they initially appear to be hostile, later on the goblins come to your aid.

early promotional campaigns (which focused heavily on the normally camera-shy guys responsible for the incredible games they were publishing) EA decided to showcase the fresh-faced Harvey as a 'star programmer'. The shy youth soon discovered that he was becoming something of a video-gaming icon.

Despite his newfound fame, Harvey refused to rest on his laurels and proceeded to gain numerous qualifications at Stanford University (including a PhD in Computer Science) while simultaneously furthering his programming career. He founded his own company – Sandcastle Entertainment – and released *Zany Golf* in 1988 for the Apple IIGS. Once again, heaps of critical acclaim followed and Electronic Arts eventually ported the light-hearted isometric golf sim to several formats, including the fledgling Sega Mega Drive/Genesis in 1990. It was around this time that Harvey began to brainstorm the concept of a fantasy role-playing title, but with a twist that would have been tremendously unique for the time. "I wanted to make an online graphical adventure," he remembers. This was a tall order and a bold move, when you consider the fact that the internet was still very much in its infancy back in the early-Nineties, nevertheless

Will Harvey persevered with his grandiose plan.

Assembling a crack team of artists and programmers – which included Brett G. Durrett, Michael Marcantel and Ian Gooding, Harvey set about crafting what would eventually evolve into a wholly unprecedented fantasy epic. The project was initially christened 'Campaign', which gives an indication of where Harvey was headed with his original vision. "Initially it was playable with others over a modem, which was very cool." The idea involved each player selecting a different fantasy role (Elf, Warrior, Wizard and so on) and setting off into the uncharted wilderness of the World Wide Web for fame and fortune. The name was later changed to *The Immortal* and Harvey discovered that as he and his team tinkered with the project, it began to shake off its



► When was the last time you saw a hole covered in creepy spider webs and thought, "I think I'll venture inside"?

## IN THE KNOW

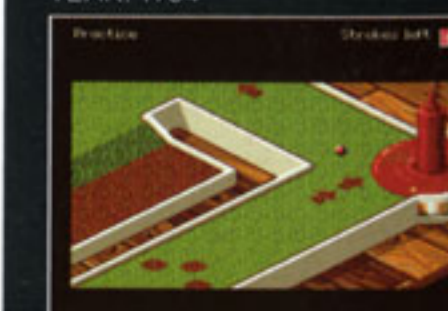


- PUBLISHER: ELECTRONIC ARTS
- DEVELOPER: SANDCASTLE
- RELEASED: 1990 (APPLE IIGS)
- GENRE: ACTION ADVENTURE
- EXPECT TO PAY: £5+

## DEVELOPER HIGHLIGHTS

**ZANY GOLF**  
SYSTEM: VARIOUS  
YEAR: 1988

**MUSIC CONSTRUCTION SET**  
SYSTEM: APPLE II  
YEAR: 1984





• Will Harvey



• The Mega Drive version featured some lush artwork, which no doubt helped shift a few copies.

online aspirations. "Over time the focus became the storyline instead of the online plan," he comments. Eventually the team realised that if they were to incorporate an arresting plot, the online multiplayer would have to be sacrificed



• The barrel was great. Just be sure to avoid whirlpools.

Harvey didn't want his new game to blend into the crowd and nurtured definite ideas regarding the kind of experience he wanted to create. Rather than follow the clichéd route of pitting good against evil in a fantasy environment, the team decided to force players to think carefully about what course of action they took. "We had a theme to the storyline," explains Harvey. "That is to say, the story had a point, or a moral. The moral was: 'Think before you act; be aware of the consequences of your actions'. This moral is supported by the plot." As the player descended ever further into the labyrinth this became more and more apparent and several moral judgements had to be made in

then you will miss the opportunity to make allies of them later in the quest" explains Harvey. "You can still finish the game but you get a different ending at best." Few games of this type ever attempted to portray tangible consequences to the player's actions in the same way *The Immortal* did.

Possibly the most memorable aspect of *The Immortal* was the innovative combat engine. At certain points the player was able to engage enemies in one-on-one combat. In the console and PC versions the viewpoint would quickly switch to a close up of the two combatants, and by combining button presses with the direction pad the player was able to swing a particularly sharp sword at their quarry. Evasive manoeuvres were also possible, allowing for an effortless shift between offensive and defensive postures. This called for a refined sense of timing, as it was imperative that the sword swipes and dodges were executed correctly. It hardly ranks as the most awe-inspiring fighting engine ever crafted but remains a definite improvement on the usual turn-based variety seen in fantasy adventures of the era.

The incredible enemy death animations were the icing on the cake

## "IT'S KIND OF HARD TO HAVE A WIZARD'S HEAD BLOW UP WITHOUT BLOOD" WILL HARVEY

entirely. The focus was duly altered and as a result *The Immortal* became a resolutely single-player adventure.

The game made its debut on the Apple IIGS in 1990 (it turned out to be one of EA's last major releases for the system) but when it became obvious that Harvey and his team at Sandcastle had crafted a truly unique role-playing experience, *The Immortal* was ported to the Amiga, Atari ST, IBM PC, Mega Drive and even the lowly 8-bit Nintendo Entertainment System (NES).

It's very easy to pigeonhole Harvey's game as 'just another role-playing adventure', but in reality it's actually more of a curiously compulsive mixture of real-time action and 'point-and-click' exploration. Viewed from an isometric viewpoint, the action takes place in the dank subterranean ruins beneath the ancient city of Erinoch. The player assumes the role of an apprentice wizard desperately searching for his master Mordamir, who has absent-mindedly got himself lost within the ominously titled 'Labyrinth of Eternity'. Along the way there are numerous encounters with shady denizens of the deep, including goblins, trolls, giant worms, spiders and finally a massive, fire-breathing dragon.

order to progress – the actions of which had a telling impact on the eventual outcome of the adventure. "For example, if you indiscriminately kill goblins,

and unsurprisingly they caused the design team a few headaches when it came to porting the game to the 'kiddie friendly' home console market: "Sega



• Sanitised, gore-free combat ensues in the NES conversion.



• Our wizard chum appears to be offering this dragon a sore throat lozenge – what a thoughtful chap.



• Mystical-malarkey abounds as the wizard takes flight on his lucky, lucky carpet.



• The actually-quite-good NES version in all its glory.



• We had an amusing caption for here but we forgot it.

were fine with the death animations, but Nintendo weren't," remembers Harvey. "They made us get rid of the blood in the NES version." This was standard procedure as far as Nintendo was concerned (who could possibly forget the infamous SNES version of *Mortal Kombat*, which lacked the biggest selling point of the game – gore?). Harvey and his team – so used to having total freedom when coding for the Apple IIGS – could do nothing but comply with the request. "It's kind of hard to have a wizard's head blow up without blood, but we did what we could" he says with a wry smile. Regardless of this, Harvey is proud of what his team achieved with the limited power of Nintendo's aging 8-bit machine. "The graphics on the NES were unprecedented at the time," he says with a sense of pride. Indeed, when placed alongside the 16-bit versions, the Nintendo port doesn't look as shoddy as you might expect.

One characteristic of *The Immortal* that went down slightly less well with many sectors of the gaming public was the preference for unpredictable and wholly unexpected deaths. At many points within the game the player would be killed simply for stepping on the wrong spot or speaking to a character without having a certain item in their inventory. Playing without a guidebook quickly changed the game into an almost tiresome process of trial and error. It was essential to find out what mistakes to avoid by dying a few times, then completing the level with this vital knowledge in hand. One infamous section involved inspecting a seemingly harmless skeleton for valuable items. Replying positively when asked to inspect 'something wet' underneath the bones resulted in the player being instantly dissolved by deadly slime. To some this kind of structure proved to be an almost insurmountable obstacle to enjoyment, but to others it harked back to the unforgiving graphical adventures of old and gave the game an edgy, unpredictable quality. At times the level of tension was almost unbearable and it made players more wary of wandering into situations that might prove to be fatal. Besides, the elaborate player death animations often went some way to softening the disappointment of an unexpected demise.

Although *The Immortal* garnered worldwide success and healthy sales, it wasn't enough to gain a sequel. Sandcastle Entertainment began to dabble in online gaming technology, creating tools that permitted smooth, lag-free gaming between online players. The company was eventually purchased by Adobe in 1997 and the following year Harvey founded 'There Inc' from a room in his parents' house, working alongside artist Jeffrey Ventrella to create the immersive and open-ended virtual 3D world 'There'.

Although it was originally designed with communication and social interaction in mind, Harvey found that the company's investors didn't share his utopian vision and in 2004 the decision was made to ditch the consumer side of the business and develop exclusively for (more profitable) military and government applications of the technology. Harvey had left by this point and was already working on a tantalising new project called 'IMVU' (www.imvu.com) – the next generation of instant messaging. Using fully customisable 3D avatars, people from all over the world are now able to create themselves in an online world and converse with friends as if they were in the same space. According to Harvey, the service has over 7 million users and is growing faster than more traditional social networking sites like MySpace. With yet another success under his belt, time will tell if Harvey decides to step back into the video-gaming arena and produce another unique experience for fans of *The Immortal* to savour.



• "Which way now?"



• We're sure we've already seen this in Raiders of the Lost Ark.



• "Now it's your turn."

## MAKE MINE A DECAF

Harvey was extremely fond of inserting secret 'Easter eggs' into many of his games – *Zany Golf* famously featured a secret hole that was almost impossible to access, and Harvey's conversion of Mark Cerny's arcade classic *Marble Madness* shipped with an additional level that even Cerny himself was unaware of. *The Immortal* was no exception and contained a highly unusual hidden section. "The secret level in the Apple version has an almost infinite corridor with the design team of the game hidden at the end," reveals Harvey. "On Level five you had to make it through the trap door room and fall into the last hole without using your trap door sensor, then walk for 15 minutes in the corridor. You also needed the 'coffee maker' object which is found earlier in the game for when you meet one of the team, otherwise he kills you." Who says game designers are highly strung?

