

THE MAKING OF...

RISE OF THE ROBOYS

Damien McFerran selflessly puts a comforting arm around the weary shoulders of former Mirage designer Sean Naden and proceeds to ply him with copious amounts of cinder toffee and fizzy pop until he reveals the entire sorry saga of one of the most lamentable videogames of all time



IN THE KNOW

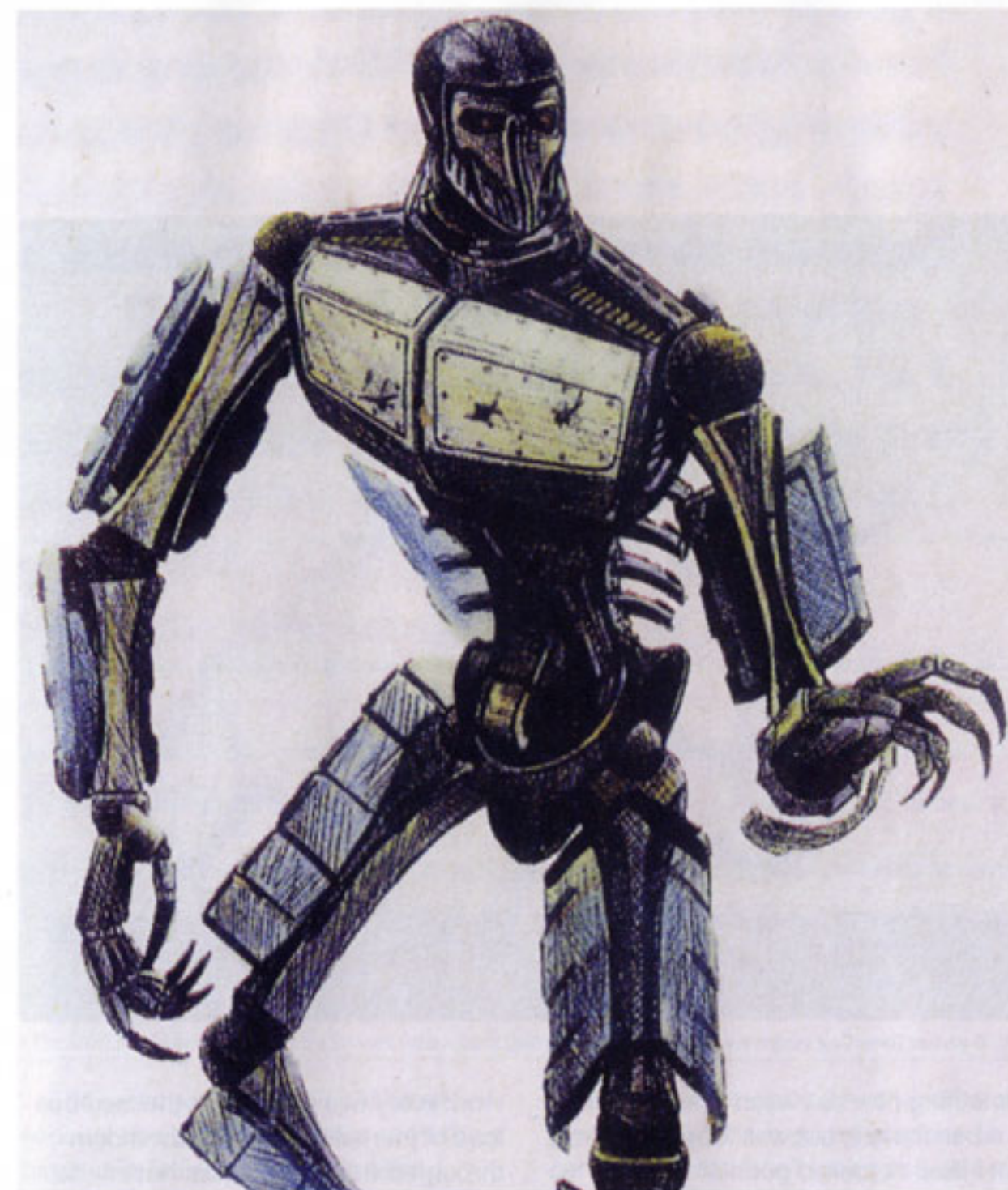


PUBLISHER: TIME WARNER
DEVELOPER: MIRAGE
RELEASED: 1994
GENRE: 2D FIGHTER
EXPECT TO PAY: £1+
 (FORMAT PRICES VARY)

Ordinarily, when we choose to investigate a game here at *Retro Gamer* it's usually one that is held in high regard. However, to demonstrate our unpredictability, we're covering a game that is almost universally reviled as opposed to revered; a game that so gravely offended *Amiga Power* magazine that one staff member was moved to describe it as, "The nearest the software industry has come to robbing an elderly deaf woman in a wheelchair – whose son has just died in a car accident returning from the funeral of his father and sister, killed when their ancestral home burned to the ground – and then severely beating her. With the diseased family pet." Ouch. The game on the receiving end was Mirage's *Rise Of The Robots*.

One of the most excessively hyped videogames of all time, *Rise* was supposed to herald a new era of graphical opulence while simultaneously revolutionising the one-on-one fighting genre – then at the height of its popularity thanks to arcade smash hits *Street Fighter II* and *Mortal Kombat*. When you consider that it ultimately achieved neither of these things and consequently went on to become infamous for the frosty critical reception it garnered, it's perfectly understandable that the team behind the game are extremely reluctant to break their decade-long silence and spill the beans on what went so horribly askew. But here at *Retro Gamer* we're loath to give in so easily and after a bit of cajoling and harassment we managed to converse with possibly the most significant

member of the *Rise* team – the man behind the incredible visuals that permitted the game to build up such a whirlwind of frenzied anticipation. Sean Naden isn't your typical videogame designer. While studying at Sunderland Polytechnic he wasn't exactly enamoured with the notion of spending all day sitting in front of a PC monitor. "During my course I remember thinking what a tedious pain in the arse it would be to do computer stuff for a living and consequently spent most of my time down the pub," he reveals. Unfortunately, once he had completed his studies the harsh realities of life came knocking. Prior to working on *Rise* he found himself in something of a tight spot. "I'd left poly and had been looking for work over the summer," he explains. "I'd been offered jobs with meagre wages



One of the design sketches Naden produced for the game – this would eventually evolve into the 'Military' robot.

– so low that I couldn't actually afford to take them." Luckily, help was at hand. "A friend of my partner told her that a local job centre had an advert from a games company called Mirage and they were looking for an artist."

An interview was quickly arranged and Naden was invited to visit Mirage HQ. "They showed me a design package called 3D Studio and asked if I could use it," he recalls. "I'd never heard of it, so I promptly lied and said I could use AutoCAD – which I'd also never used but had seen in action for about 15 minutes about two years previous." Although Naden was being more than a little economical with the truth, his flagrant fibbing helped to at least give him a

fighting chance of landing the job. To his surprise, the previous indifference he had felt towards computer design dissolved as soon as Mirage revealed the kind of stuff it was working on. "I remember they showed me a crude segmented robot hand which looked astonishing for the time, then they showed it move and I was utterly blown away," he remembers. "I said 'Wow! Look at that!' quite excitedly, which must have been the right thing to say at the time." After doodling an on-the-spot concept design of a 'large robot gorilla' an astonished Naden was offered the position. "Somehow I got a job to design robots for a fighting game and they were actually going to pay me £10,000 a year

The PC version is the definitive edition of the game – the hi-res visuals are impressive – just don't pick up the joystick...



When your robot is defeated its true origin is revealed – gasp!

to do it," he reveals. "Who said that drawing spaceships and robots was a complete waste of time?" Although he was initially employed to provide the hand-drawn concept artwork for the game, Naden's responsibilities soon escalated. "The company Mirage hired to build the 3D models was so awful I decided I needed to do it myself, so I learnt 3D Studio," he remembers. "I simply couldn't allow any of the out-sourced material to be used because it was so poor. However, not many people were doing this stuff then; 3D designers were like rocking horse shit."

Naden was now the key player when it came to the 'look' of this ambitious videogame. For influences he instinctively turned to Japanese animation. "I loved *G-Force* when I was a kid," he recalls, somewhat misty eyed. "You have to remember that anime was not as mainstream as it is now, but videogamers knew it well and so did the rest of the *Rise* team so it was obvious we needed to represent it within the game. Mecha-series Patlabor was one of my favourites so one robot (The Sentry) carried those sorts of design themes."

Each victory is preceded by a scene showing your fallen adversary...



DEVELOPER HIGHLIGHTS

RISE 2: RESURRECTION
 SYSTEMS: PC, PLAYSTATION, SEGA SATURN
 YEAR: 1996
BEDLAM (PICTURED)
 SYSTEM: PC, PLAYSTATION
 YEAR: 1996



THE MAKING OF... RISE OF THE ROBOTS

MAY DAY

Although *Rise* featured a particularly slender layer of melodious accompaniment (the small amount of music that was included was produced by Richard Joseph, who sadly lost his fight with lung cancer in March of this year), Mirage managed to secure the services of astrology nutcase and part-time Queen rocker Brian May, who wrote and performed the song *Cyborg* to coincide with the release of the game. Yes, Brian May was still credible back in the Nineties. "One of Mirage's bosses was a total Queen nut," explains Naden. "So he wanted Brian May to compose some music for the game. Mr May was actually a dead-nice chap. I recall he let me strum his Red Special... I should point out that this was his home-made guitar. Apparently he built it with his dad out of an old fireplace. You cant make this stuff up, can you?" You can say that again.

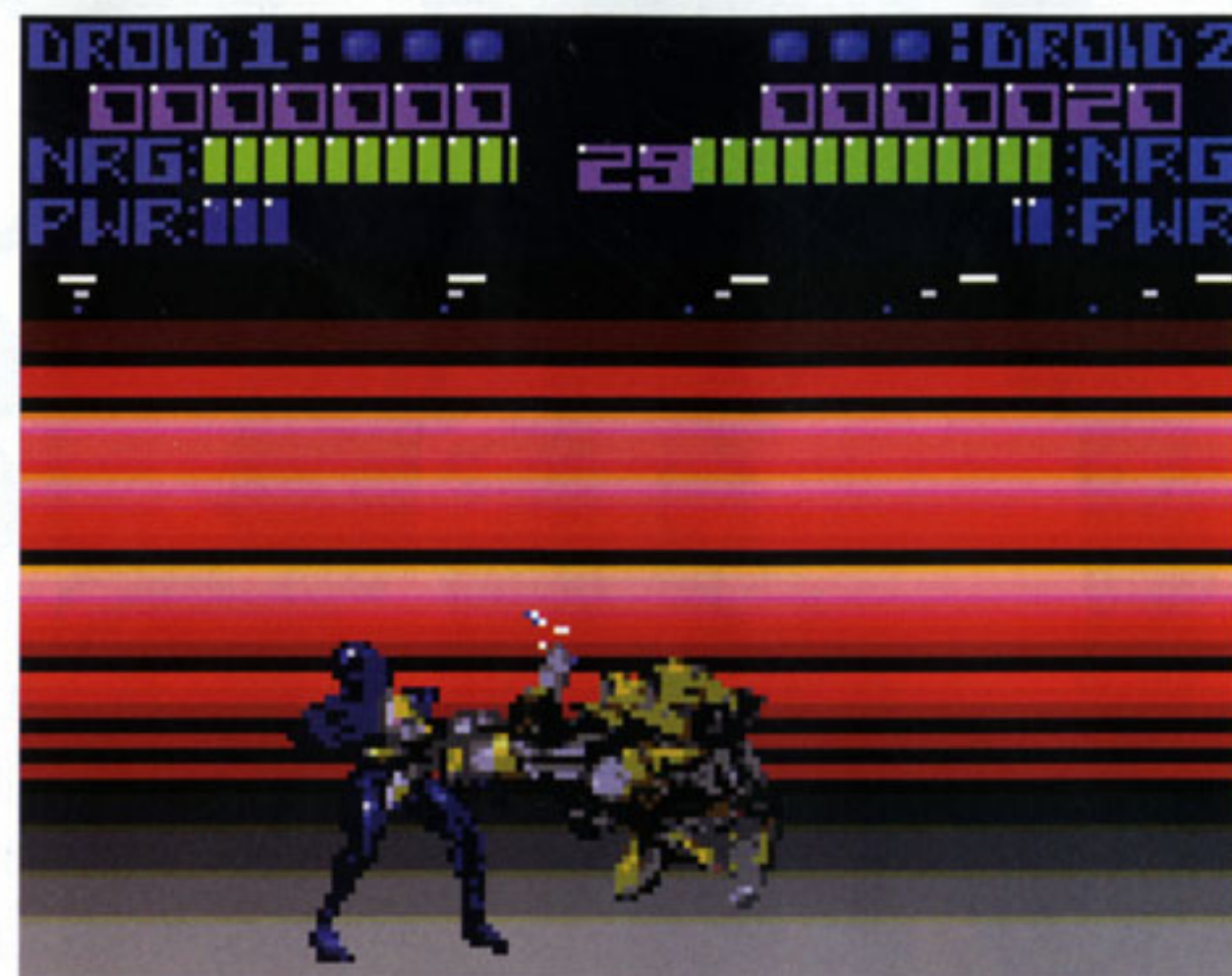


As development on the game progressed the specialist press began to sit up and take notice – largely thanks to the exemplary CGI work Naden was producing. Comparisons were drawn between *Rise* and *Street Fighter II* – at that point the benchmark of 2D fighting brilliance. Publisher Time Warner quickly pounced on this perception and subsequent promotional material boasted that *Rise* would represent the zenith of the genre, effortlessly trouncing Capcom's title in terms of depth, challenge and artificial intelligence.

While it's hard to imagine that Time Warner came up with these haughty claims completely on its own, Naden insists that – to his knowledge, at least – the development team never set its sights that high. "I hadn't played *Street Fighter II*," he admits sheepishly. "The only similar game I had played was *Barbarian* on the Spectrum when I was a kid in the Eighties. The main game designer (ex-Bitmap Brother, Sean Griffiths) had played *Street Fighter II* quite a lot but he actually wanted *Rise* to be far less ambitious and more akin to *Barbarian*. It was never seriously considered to be a *Street Fighter II* rival by the design team, at least."

"COMPARISONS WERE DRAWN BETWEEN RISE AND STREET FIGHTER II... PROMOTIONAL MATERIAL BOASTED THAT RISE WOULD REPRESENT THE ZENITH OF THE GENRE"

However, gameplay wasn't Naden's primary concern and he busied himself with making *Rise* look as impressive as possible. "It was easy for me to keep my head down and try to do the best job I could," he says. *Rise* certainly turned heads thanks to Naden's skill, and he argues that the unique designs found within the game were largely down to the fact that he wasn't a hardcore videogamer. "I think the look was



► The ill-advised Game Gear version in all its lurid glory.

something new as I wasn't using games as a benchmark, but was looking at films that I liked or looked good at the time," he explains. "Stuff like *Tron*, *Lawnmower Man*, *Terminator 2* – plus other classic sci-fi like *Blade Runner*, which still has to

work every five minutes as the next bus load of journalists was swiftly shown through the studio," recalls Naden. "It seemed that every magazine at the time had an exclusive." The level of exposure actually had a profoundly negative

effect on the development of the game. "I was forever having to re-render newer shots for promotional work instead of working on the game," laments Naden. "But to be fair, the bosses at Time Warner were just cashing in on the fact that whoever saw it wanted it. *Rise* looked good and the press was being told that it was 'better than *Street Fighter II*'. It just goes to show what suckers these people must have been."

Time Warner was keen to capitalise on the ever-increasing media interest and wasted no time in inviting the specialist press to the Mirage HQ. "We had to stop



► The SNES port looked half-decent but retained the terribly broken gameplay.

The management at Time Warner seriously believed it was onto something big and its keenness to exploit the lucrative potential of the product resulted in it being ported to almost every available format of the era. "On the art side, a great deal of problems arrived purely because it was so easy for the management to sell," says Naden. "It was a new kind of eye candy and everyone seemed to want a piece." This cross-platform malarkey put the team at Mirage under intense strain, but Time Warner casually brushed such concerns aside. "The marketing division of Time Warner boasted that they could sell turds with the packaging we had given them," chuckles Naden. He valiantly attempted to shoehorn the lush next-generation visuals into creaking, archaic hardware like the Nintendo Game Boy and Sega Master System, with less than satisfactory results. "The promo shots I

did for the press worked really well, but I feel many of the in-game graphics on certain formats didn't look good – the complicated high-resolution sprites were awful in low resolution," he explains. "Even the Amiga version looked blocky and piss-poor, but short of redesigning them all I had to go along with it." Of course the visuals were only one part of the puzzle – Time Warner had also boasted that *Rise* would showcase 'revolutionary' artificial intelligence that would learn and adapt to the way the player fought. Naden scoffs at this particularly lofty claim and reveals that the reality was far different. "The AI wasn't even tested properly," he reveals. "We had a small team of local teenagers on the job – they were certainly not professionals. They ensured the game didn't crash too much, but gameplay was a largely unknown factor that the bosses at Time Warner had not

THE MAKING OF: RISE OF THE ROBOTS

I AM THE RESURRECTION

After the unmitigated disaster of the first game, you'd have forgiven the Mirage team for wanting to distance itself from the ill-fated project. However, as Naden reveals, the members were keen to stay employed and development soon began on *Rise 2: Resurrection*, which eventually saw release in 1996. "Many of the problems found in the original were rectified when the sequel was released," says Naden. "I don't feel it was because we all had something to prove with *Rise 2* – it was more about survival, trying to rescue the brand and keep our jobs. Acclaim, who published the second game, helped out loads. Mirage was in a bubble of its own bullshit for the first one, but *Rise 2* wasn't that bad." Sadly, the quality of the sequel was largely irrelevant thanks to the critical mauling the predecessor received – something the press and general public alike had not forgotten. "What goes around comes around and the game couldn't resurrect the brand," jokes Naden. "It should have been called *Rise 2: Sorry About the First One*."



concerned themselves with or even attempted to understand."

As the release date loomed the Mirage team was shocked to discover just how high the level of expectancy was for *Rise*. "I could never have imagined that the game would receive the attention it did," Naden says. "I wasn't familiar with the gaming press and didn't read any games magazines or even play many videogames at that point, but *Rise* was probably one of the largest ever marketing campaigns for a computer game up to that time."

Amid the groundswell of hype, seeds of doubt were starting to appear within Mirage itself. As Naden's primary focus was the look of the product he was almost oblivious to the dire state the game was in, but he knew something was amiss. "The few times I played the game were merely to test the graphics so I naively took it for granted that it was so poor because it was just a test version and everything would be sorted out before release," he explains. "I suppose it was also naivety and lack of experience that myself and others didn't bring it up as an issue. It was just a case of a small, inexperienced company that got out of its depth."

To ensure the pre-release excitement reached a satisfying crescendo, several magazines (which shall remain nameless) granted an 'early' build of *Rise* stunningly positive reviews. Naden was amazed – but for the wrong reasons. "These journalists hadn't even played it," he says. "I can only speculate that there must have been pressure applied." Regardless, it was clear to Naden that the end product was going to fall way short of expectations. "It was virtually impossible to live up to

► The stunning environments were created by Kwan Lee, who was a professional interior designer prior to joining the Mirage team.



► Taking inspiration from *Terminator 2*, the final boss in *Rise* is a shape-shifting killing machine known as 'The Supervisor.'



► To squeeze the game onto weaker hardware Naden had to reduce sprite quality – as shown in this Mega Drive screenshot.



THE MAKING OF... RISE OF THE ROBOTS



» The Amiga port suffered from a sharp drop in clarity, resulting in a rather blocky appearance.



» An example of some of the good-looking graphics, unfortunately, the gameplay wasn't quite as impressive.

SO WHAT WENT WRONG?

The list of problems with *Rise* is as long as your arm, but here are a few of the more serious ones. Compared to rival games such as *Mortal Kombat* and *Street Fighter II* – which both offered a rich and varied roster of fighters – *Rise* only allowed you to play as one character in single-player mode. The game engine was hilariously broken, with the player unable to jump over their opponent (this was done to save on animation frames). The supposedly revolutionary AI could be beaten by using just one move (this was fortunate, in a way, as the player had only a handful of attacks at their disposal). Instead of using different buttons for punch and kick strengths (as in *Street Fighter II*), *Mirage* decided to utilise a power gauge system, where holding the button down performed stronger moves. Needless to say, this robbed the game of any spontaneity it might have possessed.



the hype," he recalls. "I don't think the game could have ever kept up with what people were being shown in magazines and more importantly the sheer bullshit that was being written."

Indeed, the infamous 'positive reviews' only made the subsequent storm harder to bear for the *Rise* team.

"IT WAS VIRTUALLY IMPOSSIBLE TO LIVE UP TO THE HYPE. I DON'T THINK THE GAME COULD HAVE EVER KEPT UP WITH WHAT PEOPLE WERE BEING SHOWN IN MAGAZINES" SEAN NADEN

When the game was eventually released in 1994 it was duly put to the sword and received unanimously dreadful reviews – culminating in an abysmal 5% (yes, five) rating in *Amiga Power*. While Naden isn't going to defend the dire end product, he feels that the level of expectation, combined with an overzealous publisher – more concerned with whipping up interest rather than ensuring the final product was decent – had blown things completely out of proportion. "*Rise* was very basic, in that you played the hero fighting opponents that became ever more dangerous," explains Naden. "The marketing people had promised it would outclass *Street Fighter II*, but because of this linear style it just couldn't compete. Time Warner was trying to sell the game and had a list of unique selling points to help it compete in the marketplace, sadly gameplay didn't rate too high on that list. Nobody selling and marketing the game had any experience of 2D fighters."

So, were the publishers ultimately to blame for the failure of *Rise Of The Robots*? Naden thinks for a moment – it's obviously a question he's been asked more than once in the past. "Would *Rise* have been better if Time Warner knew what the hell they were doing? Well, I suppose it was like the

blind leading the blind," he explains. "It was not the most pressured project I have worked on, let's put it that way. Ironically, this was largely due to lack of experience within the overall team. By rights, Time Warner should have been kicking our arses, but we were left to our own devices."

promotional work. It would seem I got plenty of experience of marketing and promotional work with *Rise*." Naden has produced 3D work for companies such as Rolls Royce, BBC, Carlton, Warner Bros and BAE Systems, as well as maintaining good links within the games industry via companies

Working on one of the biggest turkeys in videogame history was a true baptism of fire for Naden, who is now involved in freelance design after briefly plying his trade at Traveller's Tales, Infogrames and Evolution Studios. "I decided back in 2002 to go solo and set up working for myself," he says. "Most of my work comes from marketing and

such as Climax, Sony and Blitz Games – a selection of his work can be found at www.seannaden.net. Despite the stigma attached to *Rise* he's still proud of the work he did on the game. "It was my first go at game graphics and in that respect it made quite an impact. It just goes to show the importance of how something looks," he concludes.

» The Cyborg is the central protagonist of the game – check out that six-pack, he must work out.

