PROFILE

In its six short years, Irrational Games has flourished into one of the world's busiest and most well-respected games development houses. After *System Shock 2*, it released cult-classic *Freedom Force* and excellent shooter *Tribes: Vengeance*. The team is currently working on *SWAT 4*, *Freedom Force Vs The Third Reich* and *BioShock*.

NAME: Ken Levine
ROLE ON *SS2*:
Lead designer and scriptwriter
FIRST GAME WORKED ON:
Thief: The Dark Project
WHERE IS HE NOW?
Heading up Irrational and working on *Freedom Force Vs The Third Reich* and *BioShock*.

NAME: Jonathan Chey
ROLE ON *B&W*:
Project manager and programmer
FIRST GAME WORKED ON:
Flight Unlimited II
WHERE IS HE NOW?
Working on *Freedom Force Vs The Third Reich* at Irrational, as well as developing new technologies for future games.

GAMES THAT CHANGED THE WORLD

SYSTEM SHOCK 2

The face of the RPG genre could have been very different had it not been for the vision of a small development company. *Martin Korda* **uncovers the story behind a masterpiece...**

IMAGINE a world in which *Deus Ex, Morrowind, Knights Of The Old Republic* and *Vampire: The Masquerade – Bloodlines* never existed. It's a scenario that's not as far-fetched as you may think. Had it not been for 1999's ground-breaking *System Shock 2* – a game that helped reinvent the RPG genre and led it confidently down the revolutionary first-person perspective path first pioneered by *Ultima Underworld* and later by *System Shock* – then perhaps we'd never have had a chance to experience these more recent RPG gems.

System Shock 2 was a revelation, its perfectly-crafted plot submerging you into a dark and sinister science-fiction world in which you had to uncover the truth behind the mass murder of your ship's crew members – and your true identity. From the breadth of its character creation options and the unique way in which your abilities shaped how you played the game, to its deeply compelling, mature and intelligently crafted plot that explored the struggle between humanity and machines, *System Shock 2's* influence still resonates like a crashing bell throughout the entire genre.

It was also the game that was to forge the foundation for Irrational Games to build upon, a titanic debut title that would not only enable the developer to blossom into one of the most sought after games

development teams in the world, but also stamp its influence on RPG gaming history forever.

Having cut their teeth on *Thief: The Dark Project* at legendary games development house Looking Glass Studios, Ken Levine and Jonathan Chey formed Irrational Games in 1998. The pair then quickly set about collaborating with their previous employer on an all-new project.

"When we started Irrational, Paul Neurath of Looking Glass, who we knew from working there, came to us and said, 'so, we've got this *Thief* engine which you guys have worked on. We'd like to

use it for another game. Have you guys got any ideas'?" recalls Ken. "We all shouted, 'System Shock 2! System Shock 2!', and Paul said, 'That's great, but we don't have the rights.' Undeterred, we then said, 'OK, something similar to System Shock 2'." And so work began on a game called Shock (see what they did there?), and several months later Irrational was presenting a prototype to the bigwigs at EA, which, through a twist of fate, owned the rights to System Shock. Can you guess what happened next?

WEIGHT OF EXPECTATION

Being handed the System Shock licence on an EA-branded platter brought with it not only a unique opportunity for the newly-formed Irrational team to make a name for itself, but also crushing pressure to create a game worthy of its legendary predecessor. This is something the two men were acutely aware of as they set about their task. But as Ken explains, System Shock's legacy also brought with it its own inimitable benefits.

"System Shock really set the tone for System Shock 2. It allowed us to

treat the subject matter much more seriously than a space opera or a zombie frag-fest. It expanded on what Ultima Underworld did in terms of emergence and even physical simulation," explains Ken.

"As well as that, it established a structure for knitting together first-person shooters and role-playing games," adds Jonathan. "I think System Shock really established the notion of immersion in a stronger way than it had ever been done before, with the player being an actual entity in a simulated universe. "

And so development on System Shock 2 began in earnest, with Irrational's small team throwing itself into the project with unwavering commitment and a lucid idea of the direction in which it wanted to take the game.

"System Shock 2 never really changed much from the original conception," remembers Ken. "To be

honest, the Thief engine wasn't exactly a visual powerhouse. Knowing that we couldn't compete graphically with the Quakes and the Unreals of the world, we decided to focus on gameplay, specifically on story and RPG elements. From the first prototype, we had the whole notion of a Shoot Mode and an Interact Mode in the interface. It got tweaked a bunch, but that was always there. The first prototype played very much like the final game, but in a far cruder form."

But just like any ambitious project, System Shock 2's development was not bereft of problems, both technical and personal, the latter causing several heated arguments between some of Irrational's most senior members. "Me and a guy called Rob Fermier had huge fights about the whole notion of the player being tricked early on by SHODAN," recalls Ken of his arguments about one of the game's pivotal characters.

"In the game, you're led to believe that you're being guided by someone named Polito, who is actually SHODAN in disguise. I wanted to mess with the player's trust for the information the game was giving them, and Rob thought that would alienate the gamer. I think I was right on that one."

However, Ken is man enough to accept that he wasn't always right. The

much maligned weapon degeneration system, which would see your gun jamming at the most inappropriate moments due to cumulative wear and tear, was actually Ken's idea. It's also one of his biggest regrets. "I didn't get death threats over that feature, but you wouldn't want your mother reading some of what's been posted about it," he admits.

HOLES IN THE CODE

Irrational's already gargantuan goal of creating a revolutionary game was made even harder thanks to the team having to work with an unfinished version of the Dark Engine throughout most of the project. With only months to spare before System Shock 2 was to ship, the finished version of the Dark Engine

SS2 set a new standard for RPG games.

One of the game's few negative points was the weapon degeneration system.
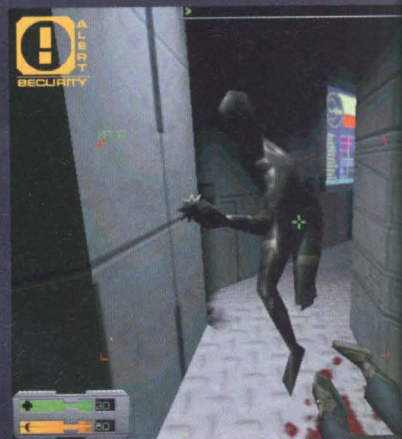
CURB YOUR ENTHUSIASM

THE FUTURE'S BRIGHT, THE FUTURE'S BIOSHOCK

OK, it's not System Shock 3, but it's the next best thing. For the best part of three years, Irrational has been secretly working on BioShock, an open-ended first-person RPG set in a deserted WWII laboratory and bearing more than a passing resemblance to System Shock 2. In fact, Irrational has even gone so far as to say that BioShock is the spiritual successor to System Shock 2.

As if that wasn't exciting enough, the project is made all the more mouth-watering by the fact the team working on it is almost identical to the team that created System Shock 2, including Ken Levine, Jonathan Chey and the brains behind System Shock 2's sublime sound and music Eric Brosius.
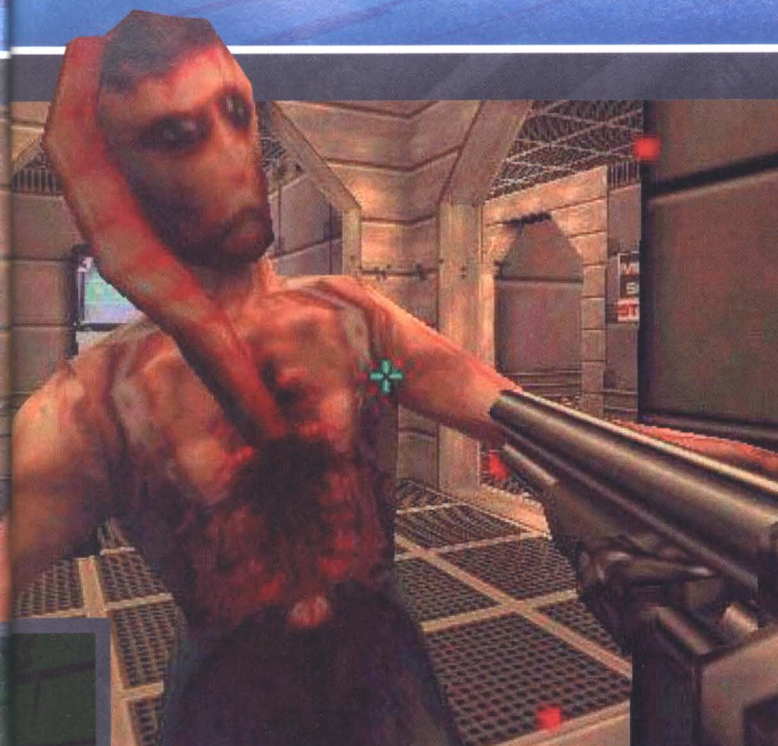
The game is still pretty far from completion, but we're already more than a little moist at the prospect of it. Could Irrational be about to repeat history and reinvent the genre once again? Time will tell.

Now that's definitely a ten-pinter.

Developed in just over a year, SS2 was a stunning piece of programming.

How could we forget?

finally arrived from Looking Glass Studios, forcing Irrational to work in sweatshop-conditions in order to eradicate as many bugs as possible.

The team succeeded, but the diversion of manpower from the main game coding is something both men would like to have avoided, especially given the minuscule size and general inexperience of the team, small budget and most amazingly of all,

## "I didn't get death threats, but I'm glad my mother never read the posts"

KEN LEVINE LEAD DESIGNER AND SCRIPTWRITER, *SYSTEM SHOCK 2*

a ridiculously short development time-frame of just over a year. In fact, given its sheer scope and quality, *System Shock 2* must surely go down as one of the most impressive programming feats in gaming history.

However, as Jonathan Chey recalls, not all of the problems were as stressful as ironing out bugs and wanting to stove each other's heads in. Some were just downright weird. "One time when the EA
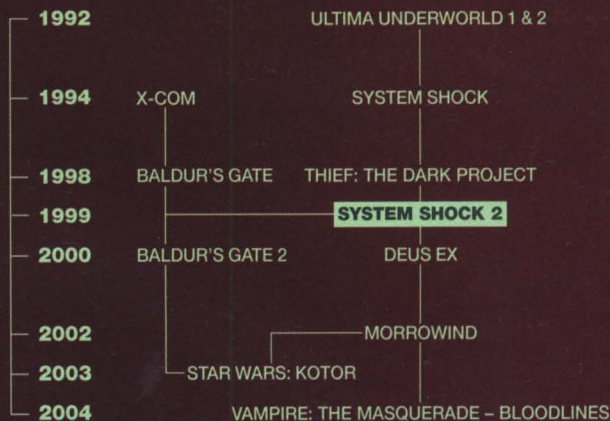
bigwigs came to visit, I had to do a quick run around the office to make sure it met basic sanitation requirements. Among other things I had to clean up were a plastic cup full of tobacco chew spit and human hair where someone had decided to give themselves a haircut." Nice.

RECKONING DAY

After endless months of hard labour, the game was finally ready to be unleashed on a now hugely expectant public, buoyed by universally positive press coverage and a belief that maybe, just maybe, Irrational Games had done the impossible – not only created a game that did justice to *System Shock*, but a game that raised the RPG bar yet further.

Undoubtedly, *System Shock 2* was a triumph, still holding its own today. "The RPG system was better and more thought out than that of the original game," states Ken proudly. "The shooter experience was more satisfying too because we were working with a 3D engine, had 'mouse look' and a more intuitive interface." Aren't you forgetting something Ken? "Oh, and we had monkeys!" Well we had to mention it at least once in this feature, didn't we?

Jonathan is more reserved in his assessment of *System Shock 2*. "In some ways, *SS2* was less ambitious than the original in the sense that we

preferred to rely on tried and true RPG systems rather than the more 'out there' concepts in the original. There's no cyberspace in *SS2*, no wire puzzles and so on. On the other hand, we did a good job taking and extending the notion of an omnipotent adversary, the back and forth structure of the plot and the resource gathering that was knitted into the core action game," he says.

"I also think the character creation process should have been pulled from the front end and moved into the game itself. The 'Choose A Path' system (part of the character creation setup that gave you the choice of specialising either in combat or more cerebral abilities) was clumsy and a barrier to entry," concludes Jonathan.

A NEW DAWN

Despite a smattering of faults and shortcomings, few could argue with the fact that *System Shock 2* redefined the RPG genre, melding tension, terror, characterisation and a compelling plot into one shiny package. The game not only still stands as one of the greatest games ever created, but one that has inspired a new generation of RPGs.

The game's influence also resonates within the FPS genre, with the likes of *AvP2* and *Doom 3* both using *System Shock 2's* pioneering concept of expanding the plot through personal logs found throughout each level, as well as copying *System Shock 2's* masterful and ground-breaking use of sound to generate a blood-thickening atmosphere of pure terror.

"*System Shock 2* was the first game of the modern era – a first-person game with mouse look and 3D graphics – that really meshed RPG elements, story and action in a cohesive fashion, " says Ken. "We were trying to push the notion of Playground Design, where you're given a large, open-ended toolset and unleashed upon an emergent interactive world, and if we opened a few eyes to that style of gameplay, that's very gratifying."

If ever there was an RPG from the last five years that genuinely changed the face of gaming, then *System Shock 2* is it. It was the sublime creation of a small but driven team determined to make a great sequel, which instead created a genuine masterpiece that would set the standards and the direction for the genre to this very day. And for that, we'll all be eternally grateful. PCZ