

THE MAKING OF...
BARBARIAN: THE ULTIMATE WARRIOR

How swords, sandals and a Page 3 girl turned a low-profile British publisher into a tabloid target

FORMAT: VARIOUS PUBLISHER: PALACE SOFTWARE/EPYX DEVELOPER: PALACE SOFTWARE ORIGIN: UK RELEASE: 1987

If you were a teenage boy in 1987, there were at least two reasons why you'd probably remember Palace Software's *Barbarian*. And they both belonged to Page 3 girl Maria Whittaker. A victim of its own brilliantly conceived exploitation marketing campaign, which featured the busty glamour model posed beneath a long-haired muscle-man wielding an enormous sword, the game became mired in controversy when it hit shelves.

"It was an incredible shitstorm," laughs the game's producer, **Richard Leinfellner**. "But it was totally deliberate on our part. Back in those days it was hard to get the word out about a new game. With *Cauldron*, our earlier title, we realised people had to play the game in order to want the game. With *Barbarian* we tried to be really edgy and get people talking about it even before they'd played it."

While everyone remembers the controversy, what's often forgotten is that behind all the tabloid hysteria lay a videogame

that's memorable in its own right. "That's what a lot of people miss," says designer and artist **Steve Brown**, who dreamt up the game and its tabloid-baiting PR campaign. "The publicity was really just the icing on the cake."

Kicking the fighting game back to the iron age, *Barbarian* certainly stood out from the crowd. While most other one-on-one titles from *Yie Ar Kung Fu* to *IK+* were obsessed with eastern martial arts, Palace Software's quick-paced, gory offering invigorated the genre with ultra-violence, a distinctive fantasy motif and incredibly detailed character animations.

Nestled among the sex shops and tattoo parlours of King's Cross in London, the Scala was Britain's most notorious cinema. Fondly nicknamed 'The Sodom

Odeon', it was renowned as a venue where trash horror, martial arts movies and gay skin flicks rubbed shoulders with arthouse classics by Bergman and Fellini. In the early '80s it became a focal point for the hysteria surrounding 'video nasties' when film distributor Palace Pictures used it as the venue for the first UK showing of *The Evil Dead*.

In 1985, it was also home to Palace Software. Installed in a room behind the projection booth, the company's game division started out with an unmemorable C64 adaptation of *The Evil Dead* – and survived a police raid on the premises looking for the movie's master



BACK TO DRAX

Released in 1988, *Barbarian II: The Dungeon Of Drax* tried something more adventurous – retooling the original's combat for a maze quest. Guiding either a male or female warrior through wasteland, caves and dungeons, you're charged with chasing down Drax. It didn't quite gel and the finished product remains a love-hate affair for the Palace team. "I have mixed feelings about it," admits Brown. "The simplicity of the first one was lost." Leinfellner agrees: "It was a classic case of feature creep and too many cooks," he complains. Proof that bigger isn't always better, even for barbarians.



The six dots at the top of the screen represent a barbarian's life – you can win by removing all of your opponent's health, or by pulling off a decapitation move to bring about an instant kill

copy. Then it expanded into more original territory with *Cauldron* and *Cauldron II: The Pumpkin Strikes Back*. Commercial success on those titles gave the firm considerable freedom for its third property.

"I'd always been a fan of Conan the Barbarian," says Brown, "and when I was growing up my hero was Frank Frazetta, who painted these real in-your-face oil paintings of guys with swords leaping about surrounded by busty princesses." These influences became the key drivers behind *Barbarian*.

make it work," Leinfellner recalls, while also noting the inspirational qualities of beer: "At one point we suggested simply transferring our salaries straight to the bar and cutting out the middle man."

The Malt & Hops was the only venue for brainstorming, according to Brown. High up on the roof of the crumbling art deco cinema itself, the team would often "munch sandwiches and occasionally drop things on to unsuspecting passers by" during their lunch breaks. During one such session, the designer realised

qualities that shone particularly brightly in twoplayer mode.

Chief among the game's signature moves was the now-infamous 'web of death', a whirling-dervish display of swordsmanship that was more showy than effective ("I, er, *homaged* that from the movie Conan The Destroyer," admits Brown faux-sheepishly). Then there was a spinning strike called the flying neck chop that, if timed correctly, would lop an opponent's head from their shoulders with a gush of red pixels. The offending cranium would then bounce along the screen, kicked by the laughing green imp who arrived to drag off each corpse. "We based the goblin on Stanley Schembri," says Leinfellner. "It had Stan's cackle."

Although the backgrounds could be rather cheerless – spanning forests, a combat pit and Drax's throne room as players fought the game's eight opponents – *Barbarian* made up for it with memorable polish: the ornamental snakes bordering the screen would spring to life and hiss as health bars were depleted; and late composer Richard Joseph added a menacing score and meaty sound effects of swords clanging against swords. It was a game in which every headbutt and every decapitation oozed love and care. "I shouldn't really call it *beautiful violence*," says Brown, "but just as the Matrix movies made an artform out of stylising martial arts, we were trying to put that kind of quality into the fighting animations."

"None of the German lawyers could do the decapitation move in court, so the judge couldn't see what all the fuss was about"

"Before Steve joined he'd never played a computer game in his life," recalls Leinfellner, Palace Software's co-founder. "He came from a fine arts background. One of the advantages of hiring someone from outside the business is that they're not bound by convention. So when he started designing *Barbarian* on the Commodore 64, he came in and said: 'I don't want these little sprites, I want *huge* sprites!' We told him that they had to be 16x16 or 24x21 but he wasn't having any of it: 'I want them to be 128 tall and God knows how wide.'"

After much deliberation at the Malt & Hops, their local pub, Leinfellner and coder Stanley Schembri cracked it. "We realised that if we multiplexed the sprites and had different look-up tables for different frames, we could

how to make the warriors' animation stand out.

"I really wanted the fighting to look fluid," Brown explains. "So we decided to practise attacking and parrying moves with wooden swords. We leapt about in the office against a blank wall and videotaped it. It was me and Gary Carr [who'd graduate to Lionhead Studios]. We'd sometimes take out the light fittings with these pretty big swords!"

Fortunately, the damage paid for itself. Videotaped footage helped give the onscreen, bare-chested warriors a stunning roster of animations as they rolled, kicked and headbutted one another. Meanwhile, a slew of special moves gave the game instant cult appeal and served to highlight the glorious responsiveness of the controls –





But it wasn't just the models that caused problems. The violence was also an issue, especially in Germany, where Palace was dragged through the law courts. "It got banned, then we got the ban reversed," explains Leinfellner. "None of the German lawyers could play the game well enough to do the super slash decapitation move in court, so the judge couldn't see what all the fuss was about. A few weeks later they hired some young kid to play the game in court and then we got banned properly." The game was later released in Germany with its onscreen blood changed from red to green – a fate that awaited many other violently themed games in the future.

Despite such problems, *Barbarian* was a huge success. "My first royalty cheque was for something like £20,000, about double my salary," remembers Leinfellner, "and I kept getting royalty cheques for about seven years." It spawned a sequel, *Barbarian II: The Dungeon Of Drax* (see 'Back To Drax'), accompanied by similarly bold marketing, which nevertheless could not disguise the diminishing returns.

"I think at that point we were starting to reach the edge of what Britsoft could do," says Leinfellner, who eventually swapped Palace for Mindscape, followed by EA, and is currently CEO of outsourcing company Babel Media. "By that point the American software was a lot better, quite frankly. Britsoft really was more like the demo scene with a bit of commercial edge to it. The Americans wrote big games very well. We were trying to play in the big league and most weren't really up to it."

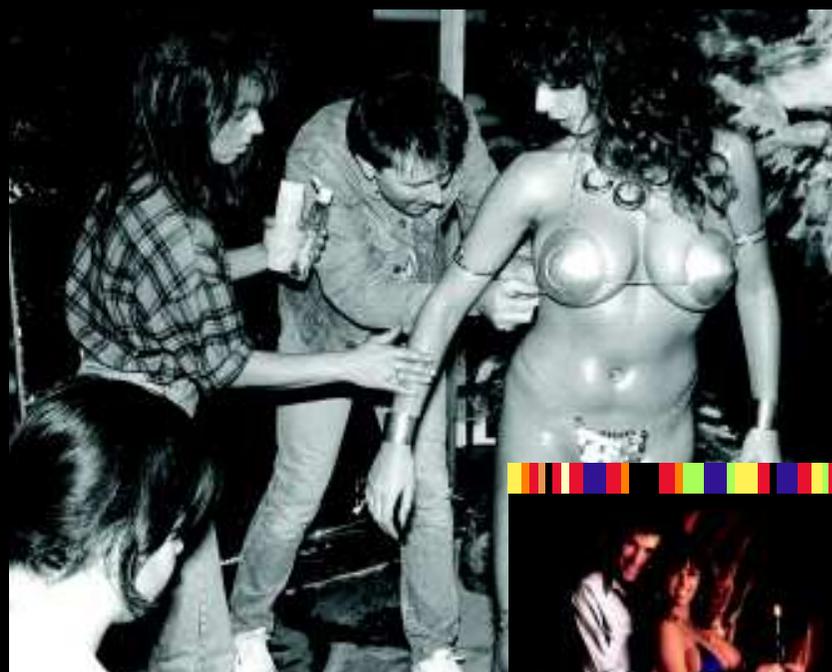
Palace Software's messy collapse left confusion over who owned the rights to what, which is probably why the otherwise inevitable modern-day reissue of *Barbarian* hasn't yet materialised. "You know," says Brown with a sudden seriousness, "maybe it's something we should look into..." 

Palace knew that it had a hit on its hands. "I remember the first time we showed it to [Zzap! editor] Gary Penn," says Leinfellner. "I thought he was going to piss himself laughing. He was just in stitches at the little guy's cackle. We knew we'd nailed it then. We absolutely knew it."

But it was the publicity campaign featuring Page 3 girl Maria Whittaker that sealed the deal. The photo shoot for the game's cover art and free promo poster was Brown's attempt to recreate one of his beloved Frank Frazetta portraits with real people. "Maria was a sweetie, although she was a bit iffy at first. I showed her a picture of a princess who had a snake draped over her – and who herself was draped over a big, sweaty man. She was like: 'Oo-er, I dunno about this!' But we persuaded her."

Whittaker posed in a blue bikini – considerably more than she often wore while modelling – and sat at the feet of the eponymous barbarian, played by actor Michael Van Wijk, who'd later find fame as Wolf in TV show *Gladiators*. "He was such a pussycat of a man," Brown says. "I had to tell him to scowl and look fierce. The two *Barbarian* shoots got him the *Gladiators* gig and he used the same persona on the show. Funny – he's never sent me a royalty cheque!"

The ad campaign sparked a great deal of debate. Feminists complained it objectified women, Mary Whitehouse seethed, and Boots refused to stock the game until Palace toned down the art.



MANY TALENTS

When Palace dissolved, Brown (pictured) returned to his first love, comics. A stint illustrating Judge Dredd stories for 2000AD in the early '90s led to the global release of a self-published comic inspired by his *Cauldron* witch design. "Yep, my own company, my own characters. Tolkien meets *The Terminator* was my tagline. Rather good, I thought." He later returned to games, working at EA and then at 3, designing its in-house mobile titles. Today he enjoys thrashing the hell out of his beloved Fender Stratocaster in his band Deeply Purple, writing, painting and bronze sculpture. "Female nudes, of course," he laughs. Business as usual, then.

Behind the scenes at a *Barbarian II* photo session, these shots show the care and effort Steve Brown put into making comfortable a costume made of chains and metal ashtrays

