Video: To make 1997’s Blade Runner, Westwood first had to create the universe

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Shot by Sean Dacanay and edited by Justin Wolfson. VFX by John Cappello. Click here for transcript. And if you want a close-up peek at the awesome Ladd-style logo Aurich cooked up for this video, you can get that right here.
Welcome back to “War Stories,” an ongoing video series where we get game designers to open up about development challenges that *almost*—but not quite—derailed their games. In this edition, we focus on a genre particularly near and dear to my dead, black Gen-X heart: the adventure game.

And not just any adventure game—we were lucky enough to be able to sit down with Louis Castle, co-founder of legendary game developer Westwood Studios. Castle’s hands were on some of the most famous titles of the 1990s, including *Dune II*, the *Legend of Kyrandia* series, and, most famously, the *Command & Conquer* franchise. But as wonderful as those games are—and as many hours as I spent lost in the woods of Kyrandia as a teenager—none of those mean as much to me as Westwood’s 1997 cinematic adventure game, *Blade Runner*.

You know the score, pal

Adventure games were one of the two ur-genres of true computer games (with the other being the arcade-style shooter), and as a child of the ’80s, adventure games were what got me into gaming. The genre reached its peak in the early to mid 1990s, with some of the best-remembered LucasArts and Sierra titles making their appearance thereabouts. But by the end of the decade the wheels had come off the cart, and it was clear that the genre was being eclipsed by the rise of the first-person shooter.

With the economic realities of the adventure game market in the mid-’90s becoming apparent, Castle’s pitch to create an adventure game set in the *Blade Runner* universe that would look and feel almost indistinguishable from the film itself might have seemed a little barmy. Worse, in order for the game to justify the amount of time and money required to meet that level of fidelity, the title wouldn’t just need to sell well—it would need to become one of the best-selling adventure games of all time (a difficult thing to do when your target genre has clearly aged past its prime).

Flipping the tortoise

Castle’s team faced a considerable number of challenges in bringing the cinematic world of *Blade Runner* to life using the technologies of the day, most of which stemmed from having to invent, from whole cloth, a way to seamlessly mesh their pre-rendered world with animated voxel characters (it turned out to be vastly more complicated than simply sticking a sprite in front of the background). Tackling this issue introduced an entire interconnected tapestry of difficult problems to solve, very few of which are faced by modern developers who can pick from ready-made game engines to license and use.

Fortunately for all of us, Westwood stuck with the challenge,

even though finishing the game required more money than originally planned. The company built a title that isn't just an homage or reflection of the original *Blade Runner*—it's a legitimate companion to the movie, fleshing out the world in complementary ways and answering some key questions about the fictional 2019 described in the film. Although it's somewhat difficult to play on modern PCs and suffers from an unfortunate lack of legitimate buying options, it remains a game worth finding and playing—the branching story makes for a high degree of replayability (something absent from a lot of adventure games), and it still looks and plays pretty darn good.

And that budgetary goal of needing to be the best-selling adventure game to date in order to make a profit? *Blade Runner* managed that, too.

I'll tell you about my mother

This isn't the only thing we were able to film with Castle, either—he was also kind enough to spend some additional hours with us talking about *Command & Conquer*, which had its own surprising number of challenges (like figuring out how to do hundreds of units' worth of pathfinding on a minimum-spec machine). Castle was happy to go pretty deep into the weeds on the technical issues faced, and we were happy to let him. Stay tuned for that video in a week or two!

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