

An interview with:
WOLFGANG WALK
PRODUCT MANAGER - INCUBATION

What is the story behind INCUBATION?

WW: Well, we wanted to do something different from the 'normal' storyline - where aliens are invading a planet and killing everything - so the monsters in our story aren't really the aliens because they are the original inhabitants of the planet. YOU, the humanoid race, are the aliens. Settlers arrived from the planet Chromos, founded a scientific colony city called Scay Hallwa, and then built an energy barrier around the city so as not to disturb the development of the original inhabitants. This peaceful coexistence lasted just short of fifty years, when an accident in the power plant caused the barrier to break down, and the Chromians and indigenous life forms - the ScayGer - came into contact. The ScayGer were subsequently infected by a human virus against which they had no defence, becoming deranged, aggressive monsters. Their only target now is to kill the humans. The game starts a little later than this, as the Chromian settlers put out a call to their home world, requesting help from the Space Marines. You play a commander in this squad, and must control the team as you perform various tasks in an attempt to evacuate the city.

Does this link as a continuation of the overall BATTLE ISLE story?

WW: Yes. The hero of Battle Isle 3, Lark Urelis, appears as the commander of Scay Hallwa. There are also a number of links, characters and connections to the original story.

Were you yourself involved in previous BATTLE ISLE games?

WW: I started at Blue Byte in the last four months of Battle Isle 3's creation, so I was involved in some of the dialogue scripting and recording.

INCUBATION is a long way away from the standard BATTLE ISLE formula. Do you think this marks the end of the 'traditional' hex-based Battle Isle game?

WW: It's clear that we won't be doing these games the way we used to. Perhaps someday we'll think of a way to evolve the hex-based game, but then Incubation is turn-based and kind of hex-based (only with squares!) I think the main difference here is that Incubation is much more about tactics than strategy. You're not dealing with tanks and you don't have to worry about frontlines and back defence, everyone is involved in the action. Incubation is a game much more about thinking that Battle Isle 3 was.

Did you sit down to create another BATTLE ISLE game, or did you just link the idea and the series together later?

WW: Firstly we had the idea for the game, and realising it would work best as a turn-based game took us back to the Battle Isle series. We just thought 'okay, let's base it in the BI Universe'.

Were there other games that influenced the way INCUBATION was developed?

WW: Well yes, but not main-stream computer games - more table-top games. Though having said that, there are many Japanese tactical role-playing computer games that had an influence. The main influence came from the Warhammer table-top game.

What were the main goals you wanted to achieve with INCUBATION?

WW: The most important thing was to give turn-based tactical games a new character. It couldn't be a 'classic-style' strategy game, with a telephone book-sized manual or a user interface that takes you a year to become familiar with. We wanted to have all the action, we wanted a very sexy interface, and we wanted a very intuitive system so that you could easily play it without referring to the manual - especially when in battle. Our interface has a sort of 'pop-up' on-line help system so that you can very quickly check information about enemies, items, etc. at all times. That way it's pretty much all action - you're not telling the computer what you want to do with all ten soldiers and then watching this enactment as a sequence, you'll immediately see what you've done.

What is the maximum number of troops you are ever in control of in any given mission?

WW: For a number of reasons we've decided that the player should never have more than about ten or twelve soldiers. One reason is speed, because each soldier has about 100 polygons and we also have the monsters to think

about, so filling the screen with twenty soldiers and thirty monsters would affect the speed of the action.

As well as the action, there are a lot of RPG elements such as skill classifications and character attributes. Were these aspects very important to you?

WW: Again, that came from the role-playing table-top games. I think it's a very nice feature as it allows your men to evolve and allows you to become familiar with your guys. You care for them and they become stronger and stronger, and more proficient at using weapons. If you lose one of your team in a later mission it becomes a pretty big loss. You then have to recruit a rookie into your squad and nurture him until he can hold his own at a higher level of play. It's at this point that I can imagine most people would load up an old game and try again!

INCUBATION makes use of the same 3D engine that Blue Byte used for its helicopter/tank shoot 'em up, EXTREME ASSAULT. Can you tell us a bit about this system?

WW: 'Charisma', as it's called, is a 3D system that imports animations created in 3D Studio. It then works separately to the main 3D engine - the engine just gets everything into motion - telling the engine HOW the animations should work within that environment. We especially need something like this for Incubation because you require the soldiers to animate constantly to appear more realistic. Perhaps in the future we'll see Charisma looking after even finer details, so if a character is walking for a long period, his shoulders will drop and he'll look less enthusiastic. These very fine details are very nearly unnoticed, but add to the overall feeling of realism within a character's animation. With both the soldiers and the monsters animating in so many different ways and situations, we need something like Charisma to keep things running smoothly and at an impressive speed.

As well as tremendously detailed characters, INCUBATION also features an incredibly diverse selection of weapons and effects. Where did the inspiration for these come from?

WW: Well I don't think you need a lot of inspiration for the standard stuff, like lasers and rifles, but we have some very special and very powerful weapons later in the game - multi-targeting weapons with very extravagant effects. There are twelve weapons in all, but each weapon generally has more than one mode of operation. The flame thrower, for instance, can be fired directly at a monster, or switched to a 'carpeting' mode which blocks passageways and delivers damage to a larger area. You also have about twenty special items such as stimulants, strength enhancers, medical packs and jet-packs to augment your arsenal.

Throughout the game there appear to be a large number of almost movie-like effects. Explosions, special effects, automatic camera direction

WW: One of the main tasks for the programmers was to have very dramatic and dynamic representations of all the action. Andreas [the main programmer behind Incubation] worked for almost a year perfecting the camera. It's actually a very intelligent system as it makes sure that you get to see what you REALLY need to see, but still always makes it thrilling to watch. It often brings suspense to the game - so, for example, each time you open a door the camera will swoop down to an almost first-person perspective to add more drama to what you discover. Also, if you have a soldier set to defend during the Scayí Gersí turn and a monster comes into sight, the camera moves into the head of the monster so that you can see how the monster sees you from his point of view - and that's pretty cool! You also then get to see your own troops react and attack you! The camera also tends to 'celebrate' events such as a soldier's promotion during a mission by spinning around him or performing a fly-by. However, I think that we have to be careful not to do too much of this as it makes things too erratic, and perhaps lessens that dramatic effect it has when something special DOES happen. If there are too many different angles in a short amount of time, you'll lose your feel for the 'overview' of the situation - and that's dangerous in a tactical game.

There are a number of missions that are simple 'kill everything and get out' affairs, but what other sort of tasks will you face?

WW: You might be called upon to destroy one main monster, but have to wade through hordes of lesser creatures to get there. You might have to rescue a scientist trapped in a certain part of the complex - it really does go on. There is, however, a very specific story line that your game will follow - although there are points at which it branches off. If you complete it once you will have to have played through twenty two missions, but to actually play all thirty four missions in the game you'll have to go back or start again from one of the split-off points. It's always made very clear to the player when there are choices to be made about direction. The story you 'read' is ultimately always the same, but it has different versions depending on your route. You might take a 'detour' for four or five missions, but then you'll rejoin the main 'path'.

What does the artificial intelligence look for when playing the game?

WW: Because the aliens in our story are ill, they are driven by nothing more complicated than the will to destroy any human they can find. They are deranged and will walk towards you until they get to you and pull you apart. The game's main task is not about the monsters' intelligence, but yours. You are in a very difficult situation, not because the aliens are incredibly intelligent, but because of their numbers. They are very ill, and very aggressive. They will never give up, and they will never quit - in fact they aren't able to retreat because they don't care about their lives. This actually makes things more complicated than you'd think because, knowing how they move, you have to think about where you might leave mines, or position objects like chests between you. Perhaps the entire solution to a map is not to get stuck in a battle you can never win, but to use your superior intelligence to move objects and trap the deranged monsters.

In comparison to this single-player game, how will the multi-player games work?

WW: Well there are several multi-player games you can play, with up to four people playing on one computer, four people playing across a local network, or a play-by-mail system (like chess in the old days!) where you send saved game data to each other via email. We're also looking at playing games via Ten or Kali - but we need to establish in testing whether a turn-based game like this would work over a larger network. Maybe we need to create our own server. The games themselves have not been fully finalised yet, but they will essentially be the first to kill everyone's tournaments. There's still a chance we might look at capturing the flag-esque scenarios as well.

Will there be a limit on the number of units in any multi-player game?

WW: I think that if you have four players you can't have everybody moving ten players each turn simply because the polygon count soars and it takes too long between each turn. On that point, we will probably have a time limit on some maps to encourage people to move quickly.

How do you avoid the person who goes first having the advantage?

WW: I think this is something you can influence with the design of the maps. All the players should have a few turns before encountering each other, and of course you have the defensive opportunity fire mode for some weapons, so the action will switch between teams to some degree anyway. The truth is that there will always be a bit of an advantage for the starting player, so maybe you have to play the best of four and each take a turn starting. Perhaps we'll have sub-tasks (such as 'first to open the chest in the centre of the map wins') that force the players to move quickly rather than creep around. By the time you engage your opponents, it shouldn't really make too much difference who started the game to begin with. And don't forget, in some multi-player levels you might also have computer-controlled aliens to worry about.

Do the soldiers evolve in the multi-player mode as with the single-player games?

WW: What we're more likely to do is give each player a set amount of equipment points to spend at the beginning of the map. This way, no team is likely to be kitted out in exactly the same way. You will get much more varied matches this way, and also encourage the players to be more inventive with the equipment they have. Perhaps one player will opt for more manoeuvrability via a jet-pack, but lose out on the huge weapons. Player one will be lumbering around with a huge cannon, only to see player three come sailing over a wall and attack from behind!

Will you be able to take your squad of 'Elite' troops into these multi-player games?

WW: Well, technically there's no problem to do this, it really just depends on how well these ideas pan out in testing. By rights you SHOULD be able to take your team on floppy disk round to your friend's house, load them up into a multi-player scenario and get stuck in. Whether this will prove to be as affective in play as starting off with equal teams, we'll have to wait and see at the testing stage.

I understand that, as was the way in EXTREME ASSAULT, multi-player maps will be specially written. Will you be able to battle over maps from the single-player game?

WW: I think that would probably be possible with some of the single-player maps, but the multi-player maps are written in a very different way to the general game maps. You have to make sure that nobody starts with an advantageous position. Again, it's something we'll have to test very carefully before making a final decision on.

Will you be producing a map editor for players to produce their own multi-player levels with?

WW: I doubt there will be a separate map editor created in time for the main game's release, and the editor isn't the easiest thing in the world to use effectively, but it is possible that we might produce something at a later date. We're

seeing a lot of people using the Internet to post their own Settlers 2 maps right now, so it would be good to see the same with Incubation, but it's something that will take quite a bit of work to refine.

Will we be seeing mission disks at some later date?

WW: Well I personally think it will be pretty sad if we create this incredibly cool game, put in all this hard work, and then don't return to it. Maybe we'll come up with another story line, use the same characters, and Ö Return to Scayra! I think this is an obvious consideration.

Where do you see the BATTLE ISLE story going next?

WW: I think with Incubation we're seeing the Battle Isle storyline moving away from the 'good guys, bad guys' scenario, and becoming much more dark and bloody. Even the design of the screen is no longer the green-grey of old Battle Isle games. The thing I love most is that there's no obvious 'good and evil', and that we're bringing this to the player. In the past it's always been pretty clear who's who, but because of the story in Incubation, things aren't quite so black and white - literally. I think the Battle Isle saga is such a good story, it needs to keep moving forward - to constantly be surprising people.

Do you think we've seen the last of the ScayGer?

WW: Oh, I don't think so. I certainly hope not!

And finally, what is your personal favourite?

WW: Well the jet-pack is pretty cool! But to be honest, I love to lay a mine, step back, and watch that alien blow apart!

Mr Walk, you're a very sick man.

Thank you.