

THE MAKING OF...

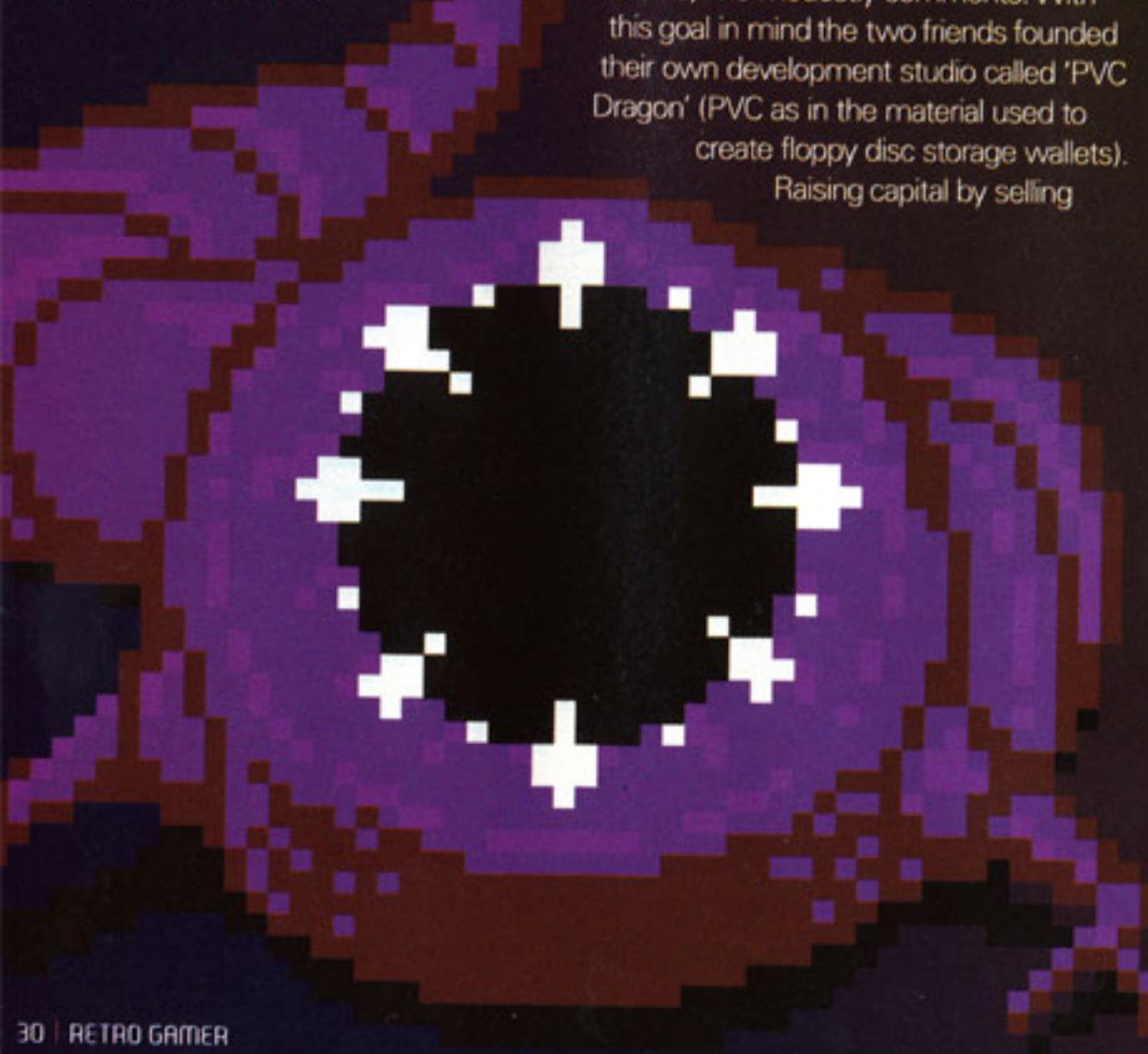
DUNGEON MASTER

When tiny San Diego studio Faster Than Light (FTL for short) released *Dungeon Master* on the Atari ST in 1987, they knew they had created something special. What they couldn't have predicted was the tremendous worldwide success the game would achieve and the impact it would have on future videogame design. Damien McFerran speaks to the creator of this legendary title.

IN THE KNOW



- PUBLISHER: FTL
- DEVELOPED BY: FTL
- YEAR RELEASED: 1987 (ATARI ST)
- GENRE: ROLE-PLAYING ADVENTURE
- EXPECT TO PAY: £5+ (PLATFORM PRICES VARY)



Like so many partnerships forged in the early days of the videogame industry, the team responsible for *Dungeon Master* came together at school. "Andy Jaros and I met during college, attending the University of California," recalls Doug Bell, who worked as director, lead designer and developer on *Dungeon Master*. "Andy had received an Apple II from his parents and we played *Ultima* on it and later *Wizardry*". It was during these mammoth gaming sessions that Bell realized his true calling: "I thought I could write a better game than *Ultima*," he modestly comments. With this goal in mind the two friends founded their own development studio called 'PVC Dragon' (PVC as in the material used to create floppy disc storage wallets). Raising capital by selling

shares in the fledgling company to close friends and family the intrepid duo started working on their all-conquering fantasy title, named *Crystal Dragon*. However, after two years of hard slog the company coffers were running dry and a difficult decision had to be made. "We decided to see if another game company was interested in picking up our game," continues Bell. "We had recently moved to San Diego and contacted the local game companies, one of which was FTL, owned by Wayne Holder." FTL, responsible for Apple II classic *SunDog: Frozen Legacy*, took the pair on board in 1983, albeit on a temporary basis. "Wayne decided to take us on for a few months to get the game to a working state," Bell remembers.

A couple of months after joining FTL, Atari sent shock waves around the globe with the announcement of the ST home computer, and at FTL development on the Apple II version of *Crystal Dragon* was brought to an abrupt halt. "The Atari was a much more capable computer than the Apple, and better suited to *Crystal Dragon*, where we were spending a great deal of our time trying to fit it in the Apple's 64K" comments Bell. Unfortunately there simply wasn't enough time to port the work they had already done and complete the game



• Drinking fountains become more rare the further you progress.

in time for the debut of the new 16-bit machine. "We decided it was important to have a game at the launch of the ST, which was scheduled for late 1984" says Bell. "Wayne, Andy and I decided that porting *SunDog* was a better project than trying to develop a new game for the new platform". The team swiftly updated the sci-fi adventure for the 16-bit generation

in C, and the performance was better than we expected". Compared to the sprawling development studios of today, the core team behind *Dungeon Master* was minuscule. "There were basically only five of us," recalls Bell. "Wayne did only a little of the programming – his biggest contribution was to figure out how to do digitized sound on the Atari's

"THERE WERE BASICALLY ONLY FIVE OF US, DENNIS WALKER AND I DID 90 PER CENT OF THE GAME PROGRAMMING" DOUG BELL

and the Atari ST version was released on Christmas Eve, 1984. A stunning game on the Apple II, it unsurprisingly replicated the tremendous success on Atari's shiny new home computer.

With one triumph and valuable experience of coding on the cutting edge ST under their collective belts, Bell and Jaros became full time members of the FTL team and turned their attention back to *Crystal Dragon* – which had now been re-named *Dungeon Master*. The creative process called upon additional commitment in terms of programming – and the results were encouraging. "We started with a proof of concept to use a painter's algorithm (drawing from back to front) to create the dungeon," says Bell. "We wanted to see what the performance was, and it was okay, but we realized that we needed to switch from Pascal to C. I spend three weeks learning C and rewriting the dungeon crawl



• Dungeon Master 2 featured improved visuals and sound.

sound chip. Andy Jaros did all of the artwork. Mike Newton created the tools, including the DCS (Dungeon Construction Set). Dennis Walker and I did 90 per cent of the game programming." Each team member had their own responsibilities, but additional brainstorming was welcome, as Bell confirms: "We all contributed the ideas



• Dungeon Master Nexus took the series into true 3D.



that set *Dungeon Master* apart from other games. I think some of the biggest conceptual contributions were probably made by Wayne, particularly with regards to the user interface".

The team soon became aware that they could expand the concept beyond the original *Crystal Dragon* brief. "The scope of the game was initially going to be less than what we ended up doing," comments Bell. "We had planned on releasing a game at the end of 1985, and in preparation for that, released a demo in May of 1985. Around September we realized that we had the potential to create a landmark game, so we decided to expand the scope of the game and forgo the 1985 release". The extra time meant Bell and his team could achieve almost everything they had set out to do – a fairly unique event in videogame production: "There were some ideas we



• Doug Bell.

DEVELOPER HIGHLIGHTS

SUNDOG
SYSTEMS: APPLE II, ATARI ST
YEAR: 1984

OIDS
SYSTEMS: ATARI ST, APPLE MAC
YEAR: 1987

DUNGEON MASTER II
SYSTEMS: PC, AMIGA, PC-9821, PC-9081, APPLE-MAC, MEGA CD, FM TOWNS
YEAR: (1993, JAPAN, 1995-WORLDWIDE)



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OTHER VERSIONS

Theron's Quest
This PC Engine conversion is probably the most notable port as it deviated from the original title in a number of ways. Subtitled *Theron's Quest*, it is split into seven small dungeons, each of which contained puzzles and maps from the original home computer versions of *Dungeon Master* and *Chaos Strikes Back*. The most sweeping change is the introduction of an anime intro and storyline – the player assumes the character of a teenage boy proving his worth by defeating an evil force (a plot that should come as no surprise to any hardened JRPG fan). The final product is a very toned-down version of FTL's classic game, but is still worth seeking out.

Dungeon Master Nexus
Released in 1998 by Victor Interactive, *Dungeon Master Nexus* is a Japanese exclusive for the Sega Saturn. Developed entirely in Japan (where *Dungeon Master* has a massive following), the game is an admirable attempt to update the classic formula in 3D, but is hampered by the primitive graphic engine and slow, unresponsive controls. Most of the in-game text is in English and while it's not an especially expensive game, the limited print run means it is extremely hard to find these days.



• Mummy! Help!

had to shelve, but for the most part we took the time to make the game as good as we could without being dictated too much by the schedule".

Dungeon Master would prove to be a tremendously immersive experience and boasted a degree of realism seldom seen in role-playing titles before or since. Characters required food, water and sleep to survive, torches were essential to light the dim passageways (and would burn

"I THINK IT'S SAFE TO SAY THAT NO GAME EVER GOT AS MUCH ONTO A 360K FLOPPY DISK" DOUG BELL

themselves out after a period of time) and some enemies could be eaten once slain. However, as impressive as these elements seemed at the time, most had been on the drawing board since the early days of *Crystal Dragon's* development and Bell feels that *Dungeon Master's* merits actually lie elsewhere: "I think the user interface, graphics, sound and gameplay were what set us apart, and to a much lesser extent, the refinements of what previous dungeon games had done". Indeed, FTL's game was one of the first adventure titles to ditch the



• Scrolls reveal handy hints and various spells.

keyboard in favour of a fully mouse-driven interface. Another massive breakthrough was the fact that the game took place in 'real time' – role-playing games up to this point were almost always turn-based affairs – just like the tabletop games from which they took their inspiration.

Although the enemies were gifted with only a handful of animation frames, *Dungeon Master* was a masterpiece of spooky set pieces and literally dripped with

oppressive atmosphere. "We wanted to create an immersive experience," states Bell. "That was the guiding principle behind having the action take place in the dungeon as much as possible. The scary aspect really just evolved from the fact that up to that point there had not been a real-time 3D dungeon game with the level of graphics and sound in *Dungeon Master*. Once you were sucked into the game it didn't take much to scare you". Anyone who has had the dubious pleasure of playing the game alone in a darkened room will agree.



• A Screamer from *Dungeon Master Nexus*.

This level of immersion was so cherished by Bell and his team that they didn't want anything to shatter it. "We were targeting the Atari 520 ST on an SS 360K floppy disk. We didn't want to have to interrupt the gameplay with disk swaps. A lot of the technology in *Dungeon Master* was spent on compression/decompression algorithms. When fully expanded, the game that fitted onto a single floppy disk was about 1.6M. There was a sophisticated memory manager that kept the graphics compressed in memory so that we could fit more." Bell is justifiably proud of his team's achievement in this regard: "I think it's safe to say that no game ever got as much onto a 360K floppy disk or into the Atari 520ST's memory as *Dungeon Master*".

Released in 1987, *Dungeon Master* won a raft of accolades and topped 'game of the year' charts in practically every videogame magazine of the time. It went on to become one of the bestselling 16-bit home computer games of all time and achieved an incredible 50% market penetration on the Atari ST alone. The success of the game was not lost on rival developers, and companies such as Westwood Studios (*Eye Of The Beholder*, *Lands of Lore*), Mindscape (*Captive*), Sega (*Shining* and *The Darkness*) and Mirrosoft (*Bloodwych*) tried to emulate the winning formula of FTL's title, with varying degrees of success. *Dungeon Master* was converted to different formats including the Amiga, Sharp



• Japanese advert for *Dungeon Master*.

THE MAKING OF: DUNGEON MASTER

"DUNGEON MASTER WAS DEVELOPED WITH THE IDEA OF CREATING MANY SCENARIOS"

DOUG BELL



• That pile of bones is one of your fallen champions.

X68000, PC, FM Towns, PC-9801 and Super Nintendo. An enhanced version with additional animation and sound was produced for Commodore's ill-fated CDTV, but development stalled (and was eventually cancelled) due to Commodore's failure to provide FTL with reliable information regarding save-game options on the machine.

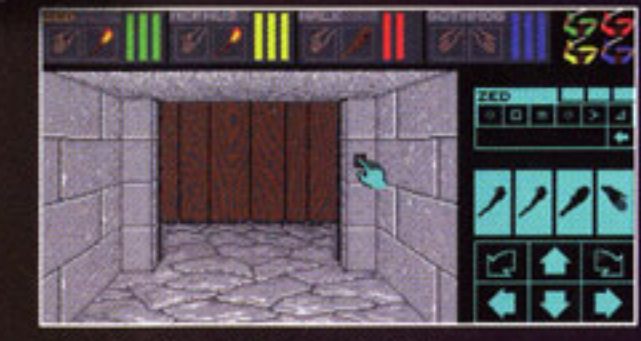
Given the massive success of *Dungeon Master* it was inevitable that FTL would expand on the game in some way. "*Dungeon Master* was developed with the



• The entrance to the dungeon – anyone with sense would turn back now...

idea of creating many scenarios," continues Bell. The first of these expansion packs was *Chaos Strikes Back* – however, it bucked the trend of the time by being published as a stand-alone game that did not require the original to operate. Although it used the same game engine and many of the same enemy sprites, it proved to be an excellent title and things looked positive for future instalments along the same lines. Sadly, other commitments got in the way, much to Bell's chagrin. "One of my regrets is that we got so busy doing ports of the game that we didn't end up creating enough scenarios," he comments, mournfully.

Chaos Strikes Back was a hit when it was published in 1989 and satisfied the hardcore *Dungeon Master* fans, but what everyone really craved was a full-blown sequel. The wait was to be an excruciatingly protracted one. *Dungeon Master II: The Legend Of Skullkeep* had a lengthy development period and by the time it was eventually released in 1995 the goalposts had not so much been moved, but rather



• Doors can be opened in a variety of ways.

uprooted completely. The game retained the 2D visual style of the original, with the addition of outdoor locations and a more complex game engine. It was an excellent game, but lacked the visual polish to tempt people away from the new breed of 3D first-person adventure titles.

Although the sequel sold well and garnered some positive review scores, it was something of a letdown after the groundbreaking original. It would also prove to be FTL's final roll of the dice and the company ceased operations in 1996. Bell remained with them right up to the bitter end. He has since left the games industry in favour of a career that is more suited to his current lifestyle. "I'm currently a software architect for a company that develops software for the auto insurance claims industry," he explains. "It's quite boring compared to the game industry, but it also consumes far less of my time. I have two sons, nine and 12, and I spend a great deal of time with them... something I'm not sure was possible in the games industry".



• The first in a sadly unfulfilled series.



• David R Darrow produced the stunning covers for *Dungeon Master* and *Chaos Strikes Back*.

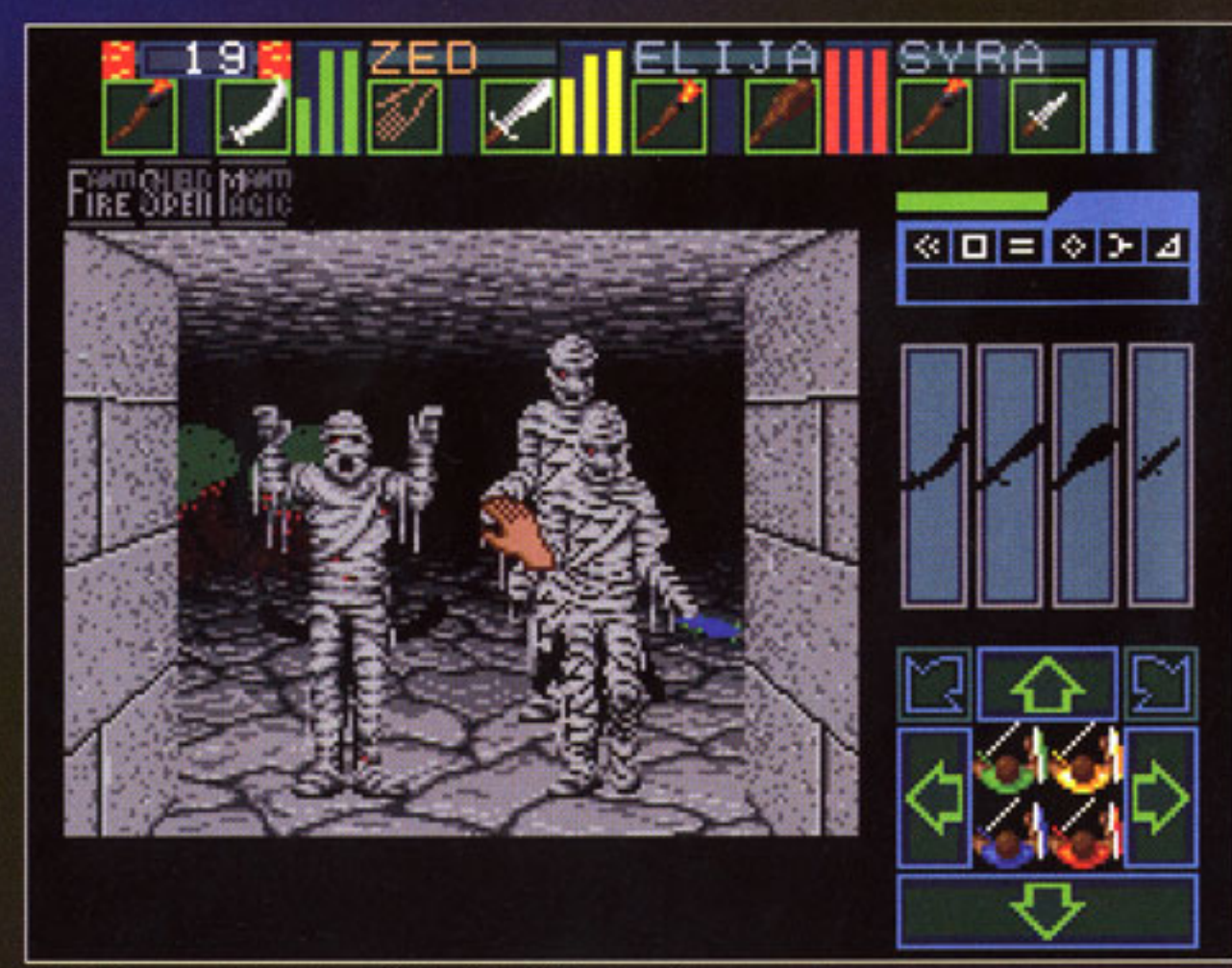


• The guys who made it happen.



• Tree-like Screamers emit a high-pitched sound to inflict damage on you.

Thanks to Christophe Fontanel of the *Dungeon Master Encyclopedia* (<http://dmweb.free.fr/>) for allowing the reproduction of several scans and the *Dungeon Master Nexus* screenshots.



• The SNES port contained the Super FX chip – although it's hard to tell how it was used.

