

1. THB is such an ambitious game for only the second project of a small studio. And with only one programmer! Why did you choose to make a 3D game? And how did you manage to pull it off?!

Björn: First you must understand that this was only the second “finished” project from us. We shelved everything we were working on up to that point (and kept them shelved for the next two projects as well). I was a student, Martin was a programmer for the German Army, all the others in the team were likewise either working on their studies or employed. We were only able to pull it off by working together with a single purpose, helped by various “work parties” which kept morale high. ;-)

Martin: The reason for 3D was pretty simple, when we saw "Wolfenstein" for the first time we thought "Looks awesome, but where are the floor and the ceiling? This could be done better if..." and after a little bit of experimentation the first version of our 3D Engine was created.

2. @Martin: What were VR1-VR5 like? How early during development were the main breakthroughs of VR6 (slopes, looking up and down) put in?

Martin: :-) There was “only” VR6. VR6 stands for “Virtual Reality engine, 6 degrees of freedom”... The first version of the engine had all the core features (looking up and down), and later we added the sloped surfaces and lighting effects.

3. The atmosphere is one of the best parts about this game, so dark and mysterious. There’s creepy music, darkly lit corridors, fluorescent enemies, flickering lights, etc. How did you guys come up with this theme?

Björn: When we started THB, Wolfenstein and Wolf-clones were all there was. At the time, Doom was just a rumor. There was also no Internet where one could hear information quickly. For us the lighting was one of our the biggest criticisms of Wolfenstein and thus the next logical step towards a more immersive gaming experience. That we were/are fans of horror movies also helped. ;)

Martin: The lighting took a lot of work. I had to experiment for a while to get convincing lighting effects.

4. @Martin: One really impressive thing about the game was seeing tons of spiders and larvae wriggling and crawling underfoot. How did you pull off this number of creatures without excessive slowdown?

Martin: The main reason there wasn’t excessive slowdown was that we used 2D graphics for all of our enemies. And when the level designers created levels chock full of enemies, I had no choice but to optimize the enemy code so that it was as fast as possible...

5. THB's level design is quite varied and impressive for 1994. What was the process of creating levels like? Did the team work together or on separate levels?

Björn: Basically we discussed together what we wanted the theme for each level to be, which weapons, secrets, etc. to put in it and which enemies. Then each level designer created the labyrinth itself individually. During our regular work parties the level was then played and evaluated. So a level was always designed by one person, but the others tested it and provided feedback. This allowed us to build levels that made the overall play experience cohesive, but each contained a personal touch and so they were pretty diverse. It was probably very advantageous that we were physically separated during the week, and only met to compare levels on the weekends.

6. @Martin: Is it true that your father did the voice of the detective? How did that come about?

Martin: Yup, true. Ralf had the deepest voice of all of us :)

7. @Björn: Which parts of the art did you create in THB? Was creating content easier in 1994 than today?

Björn: In THB I was mainly responsible for the level design and textures. However, I also drew some of the enemies, for example the worms, the dog-like animals, and the four-armed enemies. And the final boss. I created a lot by first drawing it with a pencil and then scanning it in, one of us had a wickedly expensive scanner which made that possible. Then the whole thing was "repixelated" with "Deluxe Paint" or "Paint Brush".

The difficulty level is similar. Nowadays, you can fall back on templates and/or benefit from the experiences of others. In addition, there are a lot of training materials available these days. There wasn't anything back then! On the other hand, the much higher expectations of modern players causes it to even out again. ;-)

8. Do you have any favorite memories of working on the game that you'd like to share?

Björn: I've got a lot of great memories, especially of our work parties. These were always divided into distinct phases. First the big hello and computer set-up, then share and discuss the work for the week, and then the consumption of unhealthy food and beverages began. For 3-4 hours be incredibly creative while fooling around. Then starting at about 3 in the morning, fill the game with errors due to our high alcohol level. Occasionally do some cutscenes (I was the dead long-haired guy in the intro ;-)). And what do you remember Martin?

Martin: "Work Parties" - beer / chocolate / chips / beer / chocolate / ... :-)) And Kolly's pasta salad with mandarin oranges :-)) And the green couch.

Björn: We also have pictures from that time, but they are under lock and key :D

9. Why did you guys completely remove the intro cutscene in the final patch? I really liked it.

Björn: I can't remember this at all, perhaps it had to do with the technology or the rights, Martin can you remember this?

Martin: To be honest, I cannot remember this either, unfortunately...

10. THB was received poorly by magazine critics, and it doesn't seem to have sold well judging by how hard it is to find today. Was that demoralizing to the team? What would you say is the biggest reason for the poor reception of this fantastic game?

Björn: Of course we were all disappointed by the reviews of the game. We were aware that we were not quite up to Doom's level in terms of artwork and game design, since Doom was just somewhat more professional and polished. However, we were convinced that we would make up for it with good level design and superior technology.

In my opinion there isn't one main reason, but at the time it was difficult for German products to exist in the same market as a US product, especially if it was as admired as Doom. The reviewers simply found Doom to be a lot cooler, and did not bother to take a closer look at THB.

As a good example take the AI, it did not exist in Doom, but in our game the enemies could hear you and hunt you across the whole level, even if they heard you on the other side of a wall. They could also evade and take alternative routes. We mentioned this (if at all) only in the instructions, we didn't point it out to the press and that was a mistake. The reviewers simply claimed the AI was stupid because the enemies spawned in back of the player. That these enemies took an alternative route around the player to pursue him, instead of immediately coming out, never occurred to these reviewers, since they would rather be playing Doom.

If there was a main reason for the bad reception of THB, it is because you only discovered some features of the game after you have been playing for a long time, we did not advertise them to the player in a striking way, such as pointing them out during the game. And thus they were simply incorrectly perceived. But as I said as a local team the editor does not give you much thought, and in the following two decades I have experienced even crasser things. Unfortunately!

11. Were there ever plans to release an English version? There is an "international version" floating around the internet but I'm not sure it was ever released, and it's still in German...

Björn: Yeah, we definitely wanted to release abroad! However, Kingsoft, due to the bad German reviews, wanted to avoid a "disgrace" abroad. Although I am convinced that we would not have fared so badly there. At the time there were even still Wolfenstein-clones coming out. However, we had no experience or contacts, and no idea how we could do it ourselves. We already had our own bad experiences in German sales, isn't that right Martin? ;-)

Martin: Yes, Brain Artifice (our very first title) took us a total of three times to produce packaging (!) that would be accepted on the market at all...

12. Have you kept in touch with Nicolai Beganer? I can't find much about him online, but he is a REALLY skilled writer judging from the story in the manual.

Björn: Unfortunately, I have only had sporadic contact with Nikki, I don't even know where he lives now. But through acquaintances I will send him the link to your fansite, I think he will be very happy!

Among his other talents was to draw comics. The Teacher Gazette was a popular student newspaper in his high school. And the comics by Nikki were always a hit.

Martin: Unfortunately not - but that's probably related to the fact that I've lived in LA for over 10 years now.

13. Compared to THB, what was it like working on Christmas Carnage, the followup game using the same VR6 engine?

Björn: THB had, due to the lengthy development time, the highs and lows that I can much better identify with the benefit of more than 40 developed games than I once could. That's how it goes trying to develop our first "big" game.

CC on the other hand was a lot of fun, we had about a 3 month-long creative break, and developed a game in just a few weeks that was just about half the size of THB. Technology/Tools were understood and were stable, so we could limit our work on those substantially. We had so many good and new ideas that it was almost revolutionary, and also this time it was more graphically cohesive. THB had a few different graphical styles, here we managed to simplify that. We lucked out with Dirk Petri, a new graphic designer who came from the world of cartoons/animation and brought with him plenty of hilarious ideas. I need think only of the angel with the Gatling Gun and the short mustache (no further comment ;-). The game was both politically and morally incorrect, but without leaving the genre of black humor entirely. A personal highlight were the Santas. That was me in digitized form, and I had no Christmas coat, so we used my sauna robe :D Then I died with an impressive "UH AH hurts to laugh". ;-)

Martin: It was like day and night having a finished engine to get started with. With THB, we developed the engine and gameplay at the same time; with CC the engine was fixed from the outset so that the designers understood it immediately and knew how to bring out the best.

14. I am looking for a couple of files from the old Soft Enterprises site. Archives of the site mention a special demo level for Christmas Carnage (CCDEMO.zip), and a standalone Adult/Blood patch (thb_adult.zip). Do you still have those files somewhere?

Björn: I don't think I have the demo and the patch anymore. Martin, at that time the patch was sent personally, I believe from you or your home? Crazy actually.

Martin: No, unfortunately I also have nothing. At that time there was neither CVS nor SVN (ed - version control systems which backup old revisions), and the files didn't survive the many computer changes from that time until today :-(

15. @Martin: Was VR6 used in anything other than CC and THB? Were you hoping VR6 would become the next Doom or (some years later) BUILD engine?

Martin: The code was used further for Battle Race and Project Paradise. We also had licensed Max Design a version of the engine for Oldtimer (Motor City). (Ed. Although they may have re-used code for Motor City and Project Paradise, the only other game labeled as using the VR6 engine is Battle Race. The other games appear to be mostly 2D).

16. Who holds the rights to THB? Is it possible to release it as freeware, or sell it on a site like GOG.com?

Björn: Honestly I have no idea, as I guess we granted Kingsoft (now EA Germany) time-limited usage rights, since we always did that back then. So the actual content of game, in any case, belonged to Soft Enterprises GmbH. Then Soft Enterprises/i3D aAG became insolvent in 2003 and shortly thereafter was liquidated, so it may not belong to anyone anymore, and I think the authors don't have anything against a free publication, is that right Martin? The rights to the technology/engine, definitely belong to Martin, so if you want to sell it you should contact him, and then he can decide whether or not to give me anything :D

Martin: I would love to put the whole thing online as freeware, but as I said the source code and raw data don't exist anymore...

17. You could buy a Christmas Carnage CD from the SE website until 2003. Do you still have some leftover copies of those (the game is really hard to find)?

Björn: Did we genuinely still sell those in 2003? There may have been but nobody acted on it... I still have about 900 CDs in the basement :-D Whether they function?! No idea...

Thanks so much for your time!

Björn: With pleasure, it was a lot of fun answering these questions :) and brought back a lot of fun memories.

Martin: Any time :-)