

HOOLIGANS

Mario's gonna get his



head kicked in!

Rioting, looting, drug-dealing, stadium-storming, head-cracking... How could a video game about football hooliganism possibly fail? If nobody actually gets to play it, that's how. Meet the evil geniuses behind gaming's most dubious leap forward yet: Hooligans

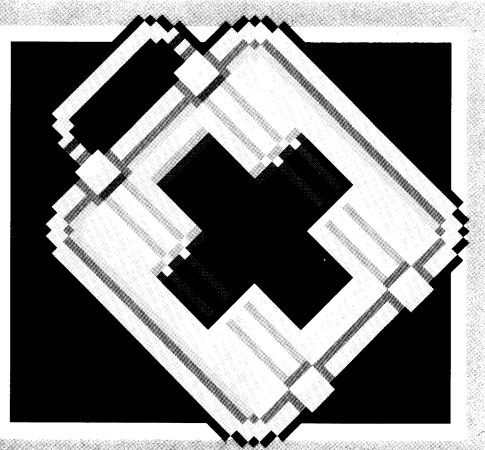
Text Marc Spiegler Illustrations E-Boy



HOOLIGANS

opponents have a hydroponics weed factory. By destroying it you give their economy a severe blow, so they can't hire a ton of supporters and win the next riot.'

It's an oppressively muggy summer day, and Garber is sporting knee-length vinyl shorts and what must be an XXL Fubu jersey, his ink-black hair jaggling out from under a ratty skater hat. His eyes gleam with paternal pride as he describes the game itself. But his body



Everybody knows that when a car strikes a man, the car wins. Every man in the meeting room of Holland's Thirteenth Production video game studio knows this too. But the company's first (and perhaps final) game is titled *Hooligans: Storm Over Europe*. And in a game centred around football's infamous 'firms', cars should be no more than supporting characters. Realism, in the form of man-crushing autos, would wreck the game.

So after much debate, it's decided that once a car hits eight people, its axle will drop to the concrete, its tyres will go flat and its driver will step out, stiff-kneed and peeved. Though it's hardly true to life, without this tweak the game would be called *Carmageddon III: Riot At Wembley Car Park*. This clearly wouldn't do, since the whole point of *Hooligans* is to create a new type of game alongside the shoot-'em-ups, the flight simulators, the platformers, the drivers... *Hooligans* marks the debut of the 'riot game'.

Unfortunately, the Dutch game-makers chose riots involving not cavemen or alien sex slaves but football hooligans, making the title a ripe target for everyone from politicians to tabloid editorial writers. This also makes it a major commercial risk. With the project nearly done, producer Jason Garber was still struggling to figure out how anyone will actually get to play *Hooligans*.

Thirteenth Production's office stands near the hookers and hash cafes of Amsterdam's Oud Centrum district, but it's hardly party central. Under-groomed men fiddle away at keyboards, the detritus of production scattered across their desks: empty Coke bottles and cigarette packs, a tome-thick

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guide to game programming, a pair of wire strippers, plus a small cardboard figure of the game's signature character: the beer-bellied, Neanderthal-browed, crowbar-wielding 'Bulch'. (Where did the term 'Bulch' come from? Nobody remembers. But it fits.)

In *Hooligans*, as in any real-time strategy game, you hover, god-like, over the field of action. Selecting your players with a mouse-click, you send them off on various missions: looting shops, recruiting more hooligans, engaging in restorative pleasures of the flesh (yes, there's a whorehouse). The characters run the gamut, including the ox-like Bulch, speedy ravers and car-stealing biker gangs. You can compete against other players via the internet or play solo, touring Europe and battling local hooligans at each stop. 'The first two stages are quite straightforward,' says Garber, who uses an upside-down golf club as a cane and comes off as a leisurely cross between a gargantuan Samoan warrior and cricket-bat-wielding Spinal Tap manager Ian Faith. 'Later, you have more complicated tasks like freeing your men from the police, or robbing a bank. On one level, the Dutch

sags from frustration when he discusses business matters. Garber has hit a wall: nobody dares bring *Hooligans* to market. 'I've met with 10 or 15 publishers,' he says. 'The "scouts", who we deal with first, mostly like the game. But then they come back from their company and say they'll only do it if big chains like WH Smith and Electronics Boutique take it.' Which, of course, they won't because the game's subject is hooligans and not hobgoblins, and because last year both the Home Office and the British Football Association condemned the game sight unseen.

Oddly enough, the team making *Hooligans* met while working on a CD-ROM-based cartoon history of Europe for children. At the time, Garber had already soured of fantasy settings for games. 'Either it's 2025 and you defend earth against alien races or you're fighting against trolls and ogres,' he explains. After the group decided to make a game set in the present, early contenders included the Yugoslavian civil war and piracy in the seas of southeast Asia. But in the end, they chose hooliganism, thinking the topic would more likely hold their interest through the gruelling production process.

That decision has had harsh consequences. Shut out by every major games publisher, Thirteenth Production has been forced to release the game under its own DarXabre imprint, and strike distribution deals country-by-country with independent shops. By the time you're reading this, if all goes well, *Hooligans* should be available both in Britain and the Benelux region (and by mail from www.hooligans-thegame.com). Thirteenth Production's very existence will be on the line. 'If we sell 50,000 copies we break even,' Garber says. 'If we sell less than 20,000 ▶

we'll have to shut down. But if we break 20,000 that proves we've got an audience, and then it becomes a question of marketing.'

He sounds like any other entrepreneur about to face the harsh test of consumer demand. And he knows the game's minimalist graphics will count against it. 'We're not a flagship for the newest video card,'

Garber concedes. 'But an amazing-looking game can be boring. Another game can look absolutely crap, yet you'll play it for hours.' Case in point: *Dope Wars*, the massively addictive Palm Pilot game that's about as visually entertaining as managing your stocks portfolio online. Luckily for Garber, there's more to selling games these days than dazzling kids with flashy explosions.

Trace the *Hooligans* family tree back far enough and you'll find *SimCity*, the 1989 game in which a village became, despite your best urban-planner efforts, a traffic-clogged metropolis dotted with festering slums. Unlike action-heavy 'twitch games', where fast reflexes are essential, *SimCity* offered zero adrenaline. This was a game targeted at the intellect. Soon, people who had thought they hated video games proudly traded cities back and forth on floppy discs. Later games like *Myst*, a fantasy adventure structured around a series of mental puzzles, would attract yet another wave of first-time gamers.

But it was not just post-adolescent newcomers who drove the industry's maturation. 'The single big event that made games more adult was the introduction of the Sony PlayStation in 1994,' explains gaming-industry veteran Dave Berk, of website Mobygames.com. 'Nintendo already owned the 14-18-year-old market with the Mario games, so Sony targeted people at university level, using aggressive violence but also including more advanced mental exercises. Its success proved that the kids who grew up playing video games would continue to turn to them for entertainment as adults.'

Today, video games are a huge industry. According to the European Leisure Software Publishers Association, UK sales last year topped £943 million – almost 50 per cent more than cinema box-office receipts. Worldwide, the industry racked up \$17.7 billion (and that doesn't include the huge piracy market). That figure is expected to rise sharply in the next few months with the introduction of two new consoles: Nintendo's GameCube and the Xbox from Microsoft, whose entry into the console market at such a late stage signals the vast fortunes at

play. When Sega launched the Dreamcast system in 1999, it sold almost \$100 million worth of machines on the first day, obliterating three-fold the previous entertainment-world record set by *Star Wars* prequel *The Phantom Menace*.

Much like movies, video games are cost-intensive ventures. Garber puts the 'burn rate' for making *Hooligans* at roughly £400,000 per year, despite many members of the production team working for less than they could make elsewhere. In the industry as a whole, salaries are low compared to other computing fields – then again, where else does playing four hours of *Grand Theft Auto* count as 'research'?

Nonetheless, some games do run up astronomical budgets. Last year's Sega adventure game *Shenmue* set a record at \$69 million, but figures are more usually in the \$3 million to \$6 million range common for independent films. And even more than movies, video games are a hit-driven industry – the overwhelming majority disappear without a trace. But the successes are huge: in January the real-time strategy game *Kingdom Under Fire*, for example, sold 3 million copies in its first seven days, at \$40 per copy.

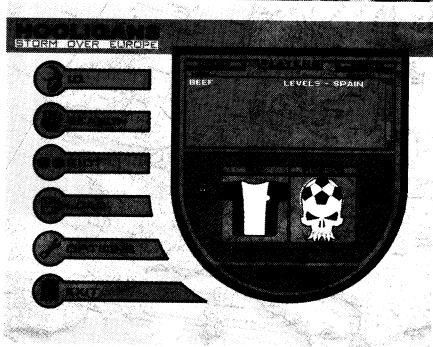
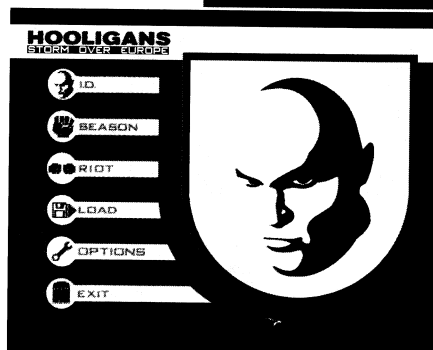
Though *Hooligans* will never approach sales figures like that, it does embody adult

gaming's combination of mental challenges with a certain sarcasm and in-game minutiae. Small details evoking 'realness' matter immensely to adult gamers, because they promote the suspension of disbelief that sucks you into a game. Today's titles offer such 'granularity' at astounding levels. In the recent release *Black And White*, you literally play god, and the civilisations who worship you evolve in minute ways to fit your divine morality. *The Sims*, latest direct descendant of *SimCity*, features a secret, potentially fatal virus which is unleashed upon characters when players download a guinea-pig pet for their digital family.

But the greatest degree of realism comes when players compete remotely against each other. 'One of the hardest things to do with artificial intelligence is creating a balanced single-player game,' Berk explains. 'Good players quickly figure out strategies that win every time. Multi-player games remove that problem, because real people alter their tactics constantly based on experience.'

In the testing room there is a single god: gameplay. Like pornography, gameplay is a hard thing to define. Garber tried once to contextualise it as: does the game's internal logic make sense? Can the player get easily immersed? Is the player's mission clear? In other words, gameplay is an art that lies somewhere between hypnosis and directing theatre. Like a politician undergoing arduous training to appear 'natural', creating good gameplay involves engineering an intuitive experience. Every few days during the development of *Hooligans* pony-tailed production manager Martijn Pantlin would bring the newest pre-release version of *Hooligans* to Basil de Vries, a skinny 24-year-old who sports the hardcore gamer's anti-tan. Under the watch of de Vries, ▶

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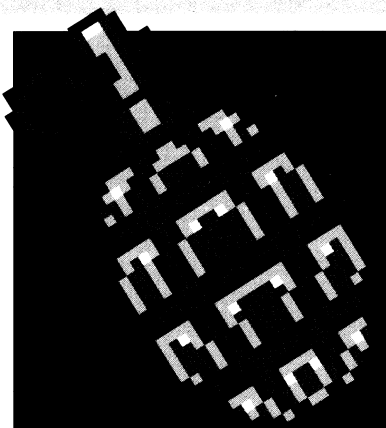
a team of gamers tested the game by playing constantly, noting oddities and trying innumerable strategies.

De Vries has witnessed the evolution of *Hooligans* from its beginnings. 'At first a game is just squares on the screen,' he says. 'And then comes, "Yeah! We can move the square!" And then the square becomes an image. And then the image becomes an animation. You build up by steps – and that's where the problems slip in.' Indeed, like any piece of complicated computer code, a game's digital innards begin as an elegant mechanism and wind up as a complex mix of patches, hacks, and workarounds. Every fix unleashes a distinct possibility that something else – something functioning flawlessly – will go haywire. 'Yesterday, the "turret" command worked perfectly: your men would throw bricks at anyone who came near them,' says de Vries, one day in late August. 'Today, the characters wander away. No one's really sure why they started doing that. The programmers hate it when you come back with those things to fix, because they thought they were finished with that piece of code.'

To keep on top of the latest problems the core *Hooligans* team meets every day. One June afternoon, the first issue raised is the fountains. 'They're too loud – it sounds like heavy rain,' says one programmer. 'No,' says Garber, 'the fountains sound like 1,200 bikers taking a piss.' The issue gets delegated back to the sound team.

But the team's highest priority is the game's 'artificial intelligence', which controls how unpredictable – in other words fun – it is. Fortunately, *Hooligans*' AI is highly chaotic. With dozens of figures milling about the screen, responding to stimuli you can barely guess at, it's almost impossible to replicate anything from game to game. Once, with the riot squad hot on my trail, I ran my band through a group of opposing hooligans, managing to touch off a full-scale riot that knocked countless cops and enemies out of commission. My men casually looted nearby jewellery stores, hired more fighters and ruled the map. Yet the next 15 times I tried it, the police deftly wove through the enemy hooligans, tracked my men down and truncheoned them into submission.

Built into the AI, there's a constant calculation of the attraction and repulsion – or fear – between characters. From a programming standpoint, that's complex, but the team strived to replicate the flow of hooligan riots. 'In real life, usually the ring-leaders start the battle, then stand back and watch people fight,' explains Pantlin. 'And the people fighting aren't only the hardcore hooligans. There are also normal supporters of the team. In our game the supporters are sort of cannon fodder. After you've started a battle, they'll just keep rioting. Especially if they're drunk.' Interestingly, the game's football-supporter characters may well be unique within the realm of real-time-strategy games. They're highly suggestible – especially when numerous and boozy – and generally



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primed for looting, battles and so forth. Yet you can't actually command them and they can often desert you at the most inopportune moment. Sometimes, they wander around the screen randomly assaulting innocent passers-by. Sometimes they just fall down drunk.

Tester Akym Gubbels says: 'When I play, I'm mostly looking for things that kill gameplay, like the cars. At one time you could kill an unlimited number of people with them. So even if someone had 200 men you just ran them all down.' Another long-running debate involved whether flying bricks should kill characters or just knock them unconscious. 'At first the bricks could kill a player,' recalls Pantlin. 'Some people thought that was too powerful. We switched it to only 'consciousness' damage. But then you could throw bricks at a riot squad for an hour and they only ever passed out. That seemed stupid too, so we switched bricks back to killing.'

Balancing the police presence has been one of the trickier parts of the game. In the first release, the riot squad van would 'spawn' new troops constantly, making them unbeatable. But then with their numbers reduced, the squad became too easy to defeat. Better AI programming solved that. Now, the riot cops move in unison. They form phalanxes to arrest troublemakers and remember which hooligans attacked police, targeting them for later reprisals. And they're tough. 'We had to decide if the riot squads would do 'health' damage or only 'consciousness' damage, because the police don't tend to try and kill people,' Pantlin explains, a month before the G8 conference fiasco in Italy. In the version I download two weeks after the death of Genoa martyr Carlo

Giuliani, the riot squad certainly will kill your men, though they first go for the knockout, laying your men out in rows with cute little blue-star haloes circling their heads.

I'm playing *Unreal*, the wildly popular 'first person shooter' game. Armed with a rifle, I chase a female opponent across a bridge, and at full sprint, shoot her in the neck. Her body lists slowly to the left, her head skitters ahead of her, then comes to rest facing me. The white bone of her jaw grimaces through flame-seared skin. Minutes later, I'm playing *Hooligans* and my troops are battering Bulch. The fat man cries 'Mum!' and falls down, a small pinkish blood spot by his head. While *Hooligans* may be violent, it's hardly gory. Even after major battles, there are no limbs littering the ground, just myriad pink splotches and dozens of foetal-position bodies – like a wine festival gone hideously wrong.

Since the Thirteenth Production team showed a prototype version at the European Computer Trade Show last year, the brickbats have rained down upon their heads. Much has since been done to avoid controversy: the final version is stripped of team colours, city names (despite fervent e-mail requests from various European 'firms' to be included) and a brilliantly nasty between-levels montage of hooliganism videos has been removed. But despite those efforts, *Carmageddon III: Riot at Wembley Car Park* – complete with flying pedestrian bodies – would stand a better chance with WH Smith. The rules of the video game business go like this: no WH Smith, no publishing deal. The publishers want hits, and if your game's too controversial to get into big European chains, your bestseller chances are nil.

But why is it more palatable to graphically disembowel enemies (*Soldier Of Fortune*) or use dynamite-suited innocents as projectile missiles (*Twisted Metal: Black*)? Put simply, no big retail chain wants to be held responsible the next time teenagers join in a football riot. But the deep irony of the *Hooligans* controversy is that if you happen to believe that video games shape real-world behaviour, then the people to fear in football-stadium crushes are twitch-gaming adrenaline junkies, not the real-time strategy types who spend hours configuring a digitised ambush.

In late summer, as the 2001 ECTS approached, Garber sounded nervous. In the end, ECTS proved quite positive; the team left with a slew of distribution details in the offing. Then came the World Trade Center attack, and in the aftermath, the deals, all but signed, suddenly turned less favourable, or evaporated altogether. Confident he'll work something out, Garber is philosophical. 'When the publishers started turning us down, I slept badly for a month, wondering what the hell I was doing,' he recalls. 'But based on the hits to our site, people want to play it. Commercially, I have no idea if *Hooligans* will work. For me, it would almost be enough if ten years from now gamers look back at it as the beginning of a genre.' ■