

prescreen

Beneath A Steel Sky



Inside the cyberworld of *Beneath A Steel Sky*. Robert Foster (left) has to collect a vital message from this computerised girl – it's not all work, work, work, y'know...

Format: **PC/PC-CD ROM**

Amiga A5000

Amiga A1200 1Mb

Publisher: **Virgin**

Developer: **Revolution**

Release date: **late October**

Size: **PC – 15 disks, 1 CD**

Amiga – 10 disks

Origin: **UK**

Following the surprise success of *Lure Of The Temptress*, Revolution have spent the last two years innovating their new graphic adventure, *Beneath A Steel Sky*.

It involves a journey of discovery for one Robert Foster. Sole survivor of a helicopter crash, the orphaned child is brought up the outcast inhabitants of a desert region called the gap

(outcasts they may be, but they dress well). As an adult, he is sought out and captured by security forces of nearby Union City, and his township with all inhabitants is destroyed.

Upon reaching the sprawling metropolis, the security craft goes haywire and Foster manages to survive yet another helicopter crash, taking refuge in the shadows...

Why was he captured? Why did they call him Overmann? Who actually is he? These are just some of the questions raised by the game, and which the player must answer as he



Many hours later, Foster finds himself on the base level of the city. This area is just for the most wealthy inhabitants

BASS is the latest offering from Revolution's Virtual Theatre designers. It took two years to develop, and **Edge** asks; does it have what it takes to be another *Lure Of The Temptress*?



Three shots of the underworld scene in *Beneath A Steel Sky*. The drawing on the left is an original working sketch done by Dave Gibbons; the second is a colour screen prepared by graphic artist Les Pace, which was then scanned on Apple Mac and touched up to give the final image

‘Virtual Theatre is without doubt the best technology – it’s better than Lucasfilm, it’s better than anybody’

Charles Cecil, MD of Revolution Software

guides Foster and his robot pal Joey down through the increasingly prosperous levels of the city. *BASS* contains 75 main screens, all of which were designed by **Dave Gibbons** – the artist responsible for the stunning *Watchmen* graphic novel. He prepared line drawings of the scenery which were then painted by **Les Pace**, and scanned into an Apple Mac for retouching.

Dave also drew an introductory comic book outlining Robert Foster’s background and subsequent capture. The final image, showing the helicopter hurtling towards the city’s skyscrapers, is continued in an animated intro sequence in the game.

Revolution is a small development team based in Hull. Hardly the Silicon Valley of Europe, admittedly, but Revolution’s MD **Charles Cecil** disagrees: ‘Hull has a very well respected university in computer sciences, and also a couple of miles down the road we have British Aerospace, who are one of the world leaders in Virtual Reality.

‘We are joining forces to write some artificial intelligence to put into our games. What we’re planning to do in the future is put in artificial intelligence whereby we set the basic parameters and then we let the

characters decide what they’re going to do themselves. Fundamentally, anything could happen.’

Beneath A Steel Sky consists of six sections, each of which contains more puzzles than the whole of *Lure Of The Temptress*. And while it has a jokey, almost Pythonesque feel to it, the plot is quite serious. ‘We spend a long, long time, making sure everything’s logical,’ Cecil explains. ‘A lot more work goes into our puzzle creation than would go into Lucasfilm’s.

‘We really respect Lucasfilm; we think they’re very, very good. But we also think that if you write a slapstick game, the puzzles don’t require a great deal of thought. You can jump around and really put tenuous connections in.’

The result of Revolution’s logical



Finally – you’ve made it into the underworld control room. From here on you have power over the city’s main underworld computers



In the Bellevue area of the city, and Foster anxiously awaits surgery from mad Dr Burke. Here the good doctor mutilates a conscious patient

approach to adventures is their Virtual Theatre engine, which first appeared in *LOTT*. Virtual Theatre generates a world where each character you meet exists outside of the current location – for instance, you can follow any character from one location to another. The game also keeps track of all the occurrences in different rooms and the changes that they might cause to happen elsewhere.

Cecil is bullish about VT, ‘Virtual Theatre is without any doubt the best



Scanned in 24bit colour on Apple Mac to give a 1,000x1,000 high-res image, each screen looks stunning - here's the main city view

'There's no reason why hundreds of people in California should know the future any better than ten people based in Yorkshire'

Charles Cecil,
MD of Revolution Software

technology: it is better than Lucasfilm; it is better than anybody.'

But even with the innovation of Virtual Theatre, *Beneath A Steel Sky* still isn't a million miles away from the stuff that was being done five or six years ago. 'No it's not,' Cecil agrees. 'What we have over our competition is our Virtual Theatre world, but we are aware of the fact that things haven't really changed all that much, and we accept that totally.'

A CD-ROM version of *BASS* is in the works, which will feature an extended intro and animated sequences. There'll also be full speech throughout as voiced by a handful of Royal Shakespeare Company actors.

Overall, Charles Cecil views CD-ROM with a cynical eye: 'I think it's grotesquely underutilised,' he claims. 'I also think it's very misunderstood. And nobody knows what the right answer is: Sierra and Lucasfilm have 300 people in their development teams; but there's no reason why hundreds of people in California should have any better understanding of what the future is



The main character, Robert Foster, swings for his life across a chasm between two buildings. Now, just kick in the window and he's safe

than ten people based in Yorkshire.'

He's also similarly unimpressed by full-motion video: 'I'm very excited by everybody thinking that FMV is the answer, because I think they're totally wrong. FMV is linear; and you're never going to get proper interaction.

'I think that by going to FMV people are missing the point totally.'

So with *BASS* almost in the bag, what of the future? Cecil intends to continue refining the Virtual Theatre engine and also to experiment with artificial intelligence. But he is dubious about taking adventures into 3D: 'I don't think that the firstperson perspective is right. I think you can set atmosphere much better by looking at it from the thirdperson perspective.'

Indeed, Revolution used the talents of film students and animators to give a critical assessment of *BASS*'s graphics. And you can do the same when the game hits the shops towards the end of October.



(Left) The Revolution crew: (top row from left); Steve Oades, Steve Ince, Dave Sykes, James Long; (Second row) Dave Gibbons, Adam Tween, Charles Cecil, Jeremy Sallis, Tony Warriner; (bottom row from left) Paul Humphreys, Noirin Casmody, Dave Cummins

Credits

Designer/director: Charles Cecil

Author/musician: Dave Cummins

Programmer: Tony Warriner

Programmer: David Sykes

Programmer: James Long

Comic/scenic designer:

Dave Gibbons

Scenic artist: Les Pace

Graphics/animation:

Stephen Oades

Graphics/animation:

Adam Tween

Graphics/animation:

Paul Humphreys

Sound effects: Tony Williams

Producer: Dan Marchant



Photograph: Courtesy Virgin Interactive

Revolution's Charles Cecil (left) and *Beneath A Steel Sky*'s screen designer, Dave Gibbons

The making of *Beneath A Steel Sky*

Fans of 2000AD or the *Watchmen* comic will recognise the scenic artwork in *Beneath A Steel Sky* straight away: the man behind all of it is ace artist Dave Gibbons. *Edge* talked to him about his work

Dave Gibbons got involved with the videogame business in a roundabout way. After the brilliant *Watchmen* graphic novel appeared, a movie was proposed and Ocean Software planned to make it into a videogame.

The *One* magazine did a piece on the *Watchmen* book and movie, showed the author, Alan Moore, the director, Terry Gilliam, but didn't mention the guy who drew every frame in the book – Dave Gibbons.

Dave called the magazine and after much apologising (not to mention a free Amiga), he was introduced to many people in the industry, including Charles Cecil, then working with Activision.

'He was interested in using my skills for a computer game,' says Dave, 'and lo and behold, several years later, he called me in to help with the design of a game.'



This might seem a drastic departure from the world of superheroes and villains, but Dave disagrees: 'Many of the skills in comic design are applicable to computer games and interactive software. Comics in many ways are like storyboards; comic book stories tend to be linear narrative in the same way that a lot of computer games are.'

So, over the period of a year, Dave designed some 75 scenes for *BASS*. He'd discuss specific screens with Cecil and the in-house designers, take notes and do rough sketches there and then.

'If I was really cooking I could, as pencil drawings, maybe design eight screens in a day,' Dave enthuses. 'Although, as in anything, you come across certain screens where you can spend two days just trying to fix them. And, as with any long-term endeavour, by the time you

get to the end of it you realise that things earlier on could be made better, so you go back and revise those.'

As well as the scenery, Dave also drew an eight-page comic strip that acts as the introductory manual. This was so successful that Revolution are planning to include animated comicstrip-style sequences in the CD-ROM version. This has found favour with at least one person: 'We're ending up with things that have a lot of the virtues of movies, games, and of comics', Dave claims.

'And I would rather see a personal vision on screen than filmed live-action. I have an idea that with CD technology there are going to be a lot of little-known actors photographed and appearing on our screens. I think if you have a graphic artist involved, you get something even better than reality.'

For the technically minded, Dave works on Bristol Board, a special type of card; he sketches first with a mechanical pencil, and then inks in with a dip pen and a good quality watercolour brush. He uses markers for large areas, and a Rotring pen to do the lettering.

'The beauty of comics is that all the tools are simple and cheap. And as things develop, this is going to be the joy of computer art as well. It's going to be very easy and very cheap to do.'



Two of the original sketches from the introductory manual for *Beneath A Steel Sky*. The cutout figures above are Foster (above left), a Gap dweller (above right), and a security trooper (right)

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