

# THE MAKING OF... TOEJAM AND EARL

Forget *Myst* – virtual tourism really started back on the Mega Drive with two aliens crashing into an oddly familiar planet

ORIGINAL FORMAT: MEGA DRIVE PUBLISHER: SEGA DEVELOPER: JOHNSON-VOORSANGER PRODUCTIONS ORIGIN: US RELEASE DATE: 1991

**T**itles that arrive in the early years of a console's life face a different kind of scrutiny than those that follow. Still judged in terms of gameplay and design, they must also do something more: encapsulate that elusive 'next generation difference', justifying an expensive hardware purchase by performing tricks the older machines never could.

root beer. And while none of these activities were central to the gameplay, they were crucial to the title's appeal as a cutting-edge marvel.

Relaxed and funny, *ToeJam & Earl* was a leisurely wander-'em-up, and for a while it seemed like the duo might be destined for great things. "It looked like we might become Sega's Mario," says

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In the case of the Sega Mega Drive, it was *Sonic* that would eventually hold the title of next-gen definer. But few games chose to match *Sonic* for sheer speed, and it's perhaps another title that showcased the real advancement that the 16bit machines had made over their 8bit predecessors: that of characterisation.

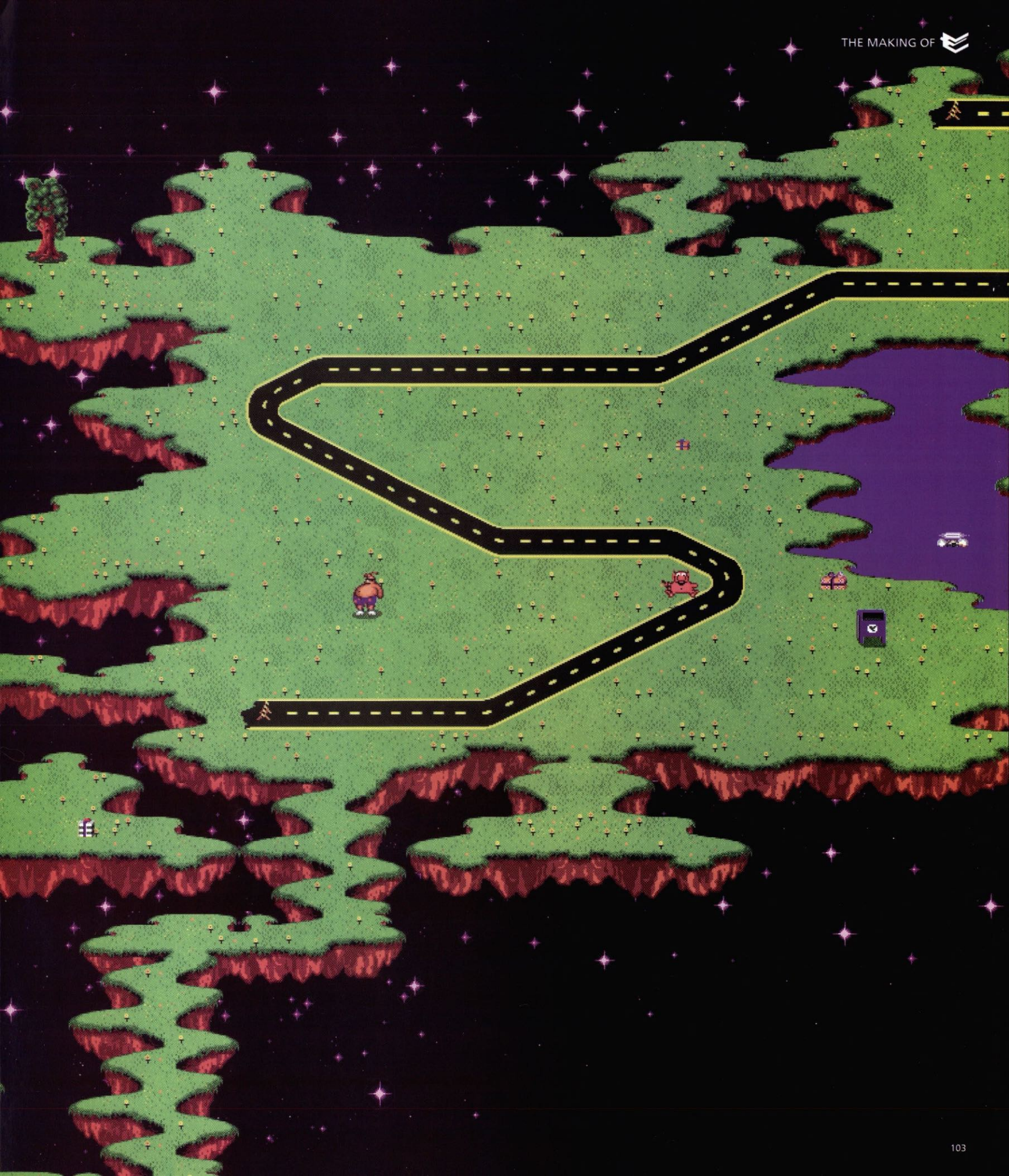
The proof was in the details, lovingly captured through tiny, seemingly unnecessary animations. For the first time, characters would move and jump in their own distinctive ways, or fidget if left by themselves. Even Sonic tapped his feet impatiently if he stood still long enough. But that was nothing compared to the range of activities *ToeJam* and *Earl* could get up to. On a mission to collect the various shards of their crashed spaceship, they regularly fell asleep, danced with hula girls or burped if they drank too much

**Greg Johnson**, the game's creator and designer. "But then Japan shipped in *Sonic The Hedgehog* and said: '*ToeJam & Earl* is out – *Sonic* is in'. Oh well."

Disappointments aside, *ToeJam & Earl* still allowed Johnson to fulfil a personal ambition. "I got my BS degree in bio-linguistics from UC San Diego. My secret plan

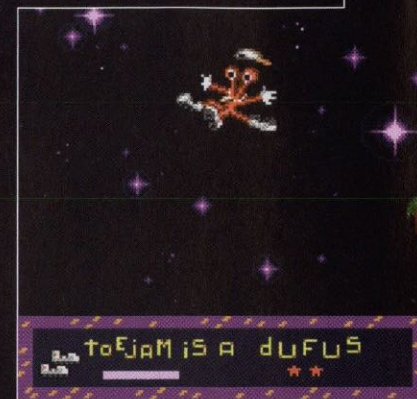








The range of characters was huge, and one of the game's greatest delights was seeing just what would be around the next corner: a man in a carrot suit? A giant hamster? Santa Claus?



## TOEJAM WITH EARL

One of the most ambitious features of the game was its co-op mode, in which two players could wander about the map independently. "Oh, the split screen. Sega said it couldn't be done on the hardware, but we didn't believe them," says Johnson. "Yes, hard to make work, but worth it. Me and Mark played the game together a lot as we built it. Without the co-op mode we couldn't have done that, so we had to put it in."



was to become the expert they would call to talk to the aliens when they landed. It seemed like I'd have to do a lot of waiting though, so I decided it would be quicker just to build my own aliens to talk to."

**ToeJam and Earl** weren't the first extra-terrestrials Johnson got involved with. *Starflight*, his first game, published by EA when they were just a small start-up company ("Life lesson number 26 – Get stock!" sighs Johnson) was a huge success. "It was the first game ever to go platinum on the PC. Up until that point no one thought the PC was a machine people wanted to play games on. Ha!" Further titles followed, but it was until he first met programmer Mark Voorsanger that things really clicked. "We actually met on the top of a mountain," recalls Johnson. "Mount Tam in Marin County. I said to him: 'How do you feel about aliens?' He said: 'Who the hell are you?' I said: 'Can you program?' He said: 'Get away from me'. Thus our partnership was born."

Regardless of what was actually said, the duo formed Johnson-Voorsanger productions, and started to work on the game that would become *ToeJam & Earl*. "It was a total *Rogue* rip-off," admits Johnson. "Don't tell anybody. That's totally common in the game world, find a game mechanic you love and rip it off."

Yet it was the personalities that would define the game itself, a million miles away from the ASCII 'characters' of *Rogue*. Wry, flippant and contemporary when compared

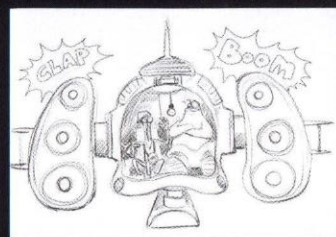
to Mario or Sonic, ToeJam and Earl stood apart from other game protagonists, not least because they seemed to have a genuine relationship with one another, bickering and joking around together on screen.

"The first thing I thought of was the two characters and how they talked to each other," recalls Johnson. He and Voorsanger approached Sega with their new idea. "They were into it from the start," he says. "They were really looking for content. It's way harder these days. Completely different."

Sega had next to no input during the development process. With an agreement in place, Johnson and Voorsanger were left alone to create their game as they wanted. With a team of just two, development could have been a lonely business, but Johnson remembers it as being a lot of fun. "Yup, just us two chickens in the chicken coop. Mark programmed, I did design, art and voice. The budget was crazy small – I think it was about \$200,000 total. That's compared to today's game budgets of anywhere from \$1 million to \$30 million."

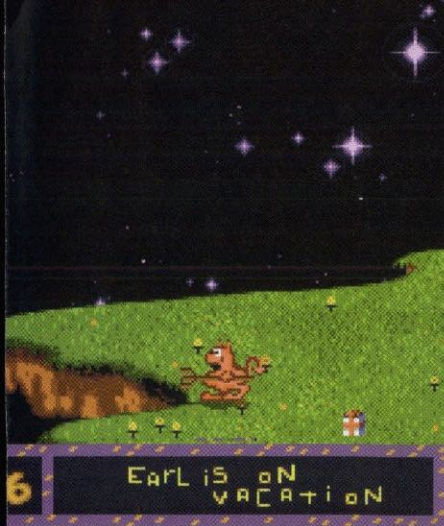
Developing for the Mega Drive was not always easy, though. "The biggest headache was the compile time. It took about 45 minutes for each compile, which means that after every bug fix you had to sit and wait for 45 minutes while it recompiled to see if you really fixed it. Good thing Mark was so insanely meticulous."

Knowing they had a solid blueprint in *Rogue*, Johnson was confident the gameplay would work. "It's sort of a 'see how far you can get' kind of objective. That's why the random levels make sense, because you replay the game each time to get farther."



ToeJam and Earl's Rapmaster Rocketship provides the loose narrative hook for the game. Having crashed and shattered into eight pieces, the player's job is to scour the landscapes to put it back together again





Level Zero is one of the game's most memorable Easter eggs. By falling through a doughnut-shaped island in the corner of the first map, our heroes can hang out with hula girls while drinking lemonade

**With such a** firmly playable basis, the game was free to develop its own famously unhurried personality. Much of the fun in *ToeJam & Earl* came from the presents the aliens collected as they wandered around. Many contained power-ups, and others were amusing but practically useless. Some were downright hazardous. Many games had Easter eggs built into them, but *ToeJam & Earl* seemed, at times, to have little else. It was generous gaming at its most breezy and confident. "The presents are just power-ups," says Johnson. "The notion of using things that are unidentified and being surprised by them wasn't my idea. I just came up with lots of silly power-ups and stuff."

**"You flip things on their head to get a new perspective. Humans are pretty darn scary. I don't think I'd want to crash-land here"**

The enemies – earthlings, in a pleasing reversal – were another of the game's joys. Drawn by Johnson himself, and ranging from psychotic ice cream men to herds of camera-lugging tourists, they managed to work as recognisable stereotypes while also being twisted into something more original. "I guess it's just generally the nature of satire," muses Johnson. "You flip things on their head to get a new perspective. I mean, when you think about it, humans are pretty darn scary. I don't think I'd want to crash-land here."

The game's funk-influenced soundtrack also had its genesis with Johnson. "I sang the songs into a tape recorder, and [musician] John Baker listened to my mess and turned it into music that sounded OK."

At release, *ToeJam & Earl* was "a real sleeper game," says Johnson. "Sega didn't really know how to market it. It really grew by word of mouth, which is a much slower process. These days games don't stay on the shelves long enough for that to happen, so marketing is much more important. That's why you see so few original titles."

**The game's eventual** success meant sequels: 1993's *Panic On Funkotron* for the Mega Drive, and then, in 2002, *ToeJam & Earl III: Mission To Earth* on the Xbox. *Panic On Funkotron* was a side-scroller, and slightly more conventional than the original, even providing its own take on

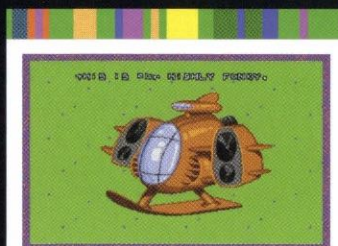
combat. Johnson puts the changes down to Sega's reaction to the first game. "It was so different from their other games though that they didn't really get it, and that's why we ended up changing the second game so much. In retrospect it was a bad idea. Recently Sega apologised for that so I feel better. I think it was a fun game, but it confused our fans. Sorry about that."

*Mission To Earth* was a return to the sprawling levels and unhurried wandering of the original, but with a hub structure and a new playable character. Nostalgic but enjoyable in its own right, it's a strange jewel hidden amongst the Xbox's lesser-known titles. "That game got dissed," says Johnson, "but it has all the same gameplay elements [as the original] and it's way prettier."

It's questionable whether we'll ever see a return for the two aliens from Funkotron. Nickelodeon now has the movie rights, and Johnson admits he'd like to see *ToeJam & Earl* back on consoles one day. He's currently working on an entirely new game for the DS, and its emphasis may seem familiar to fans of his earlier titles. "It's really designed for people who don't play games much. It's pretty far outside the mainstream of gaming. And I might say it's got a very unusual art style and it's emotionally expressive." These are traits that unite many a DS title, and prove once again that *ToeJam & Earl* really was ahead of its time. Although they may have been eclipsed by Sonic, the hip-hop stylings and laid-back gaming of Johnson and Voorsanger's title were a million miles away from anything other developers were doing in the early '90s. "People loved the social aspect of the game," says Johnson, summing things up with pride. "It brought families together, which I always thought was cool."



The strange, winding level designs were ideal for random generation. Navigating the ledges was made easy by the game's generous controls, which would leave ToeJam (or Earl) teetering for a couple of seconds prior to a fall



## RETURN TO FUNKOTRON

In a brilliant twist, the wandering and exploration didn't end when all parts of the spaceship had been collected and the game was completed. The end sequence, seeing the aliens returned to their home planet of Funkotron, allowed the player to explore that world, too. An idea so fresh and enjoyable, it's hard to see why it isn't more often imitated. "I've always been disappointed in game endings where they just give you a little movie," explains Johnson. "I thought that would be more fun."

