

BEHIND THE SCENES

TOEJAM & EARL

Of all the games inspired by *Rogue*, *ToeJam & Earl* was decidedly the odd one out. Join **games™ for a look back at this cult hit**

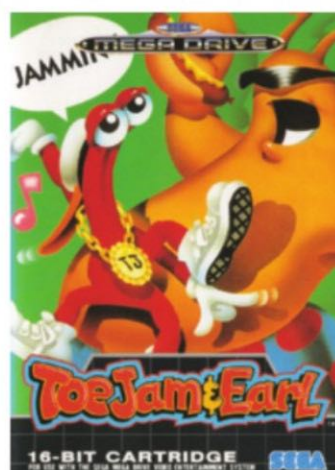
lots of fun because you can get a lot of enjoyment out of it while you're making it. Static level, single player games get old really fast."

These influences, in the hands of other designers, could have produced a game which only differentiated itself from peers on a mechanical level. However, the team's love of humour would ensure that the game had a distinct character. "I don't think I've ever done anything very serious," Johnson offers. "*Starflight* and *Star Control* were both very light-hearted and silly games. I suppose it's true that *ToeJam & Earl* gets even a little more crazy though."

ToeJam and *Earl* stood out as characters, even as anthropomorphic animals were fast becoming the norm in character design terms. "I got the idea of aliens running away from crazy Earthlings," says Johnson of the origins of the characters. "I'm half African American and I love old school funk, so that also influenced the game's flavour," he continues. Alongside funk, the hip-hop culture that had emerged during the Eighties would prove to be a key influence.

The aliens were quintessentially Nineties in their designs. *ToeJam*'s backwards baseball cap is the most obvious sign, but the trends of the time spill over into every aspect of characterisation, right down to the slang they use when they run across each other in-game. The intergalactic rappers gained their unusual names more by accident than design – programmer Mark Voorsanger has impaired hearing, leading him to mishear Johnson's intended names, *FlowJam* & *Whirl*, and add the names we know to the game. Sega loved them, and they stuck.

The plot saw *ToeJam* and *Earl* stranded on Earth following a crash-landing, with players tasked with finding the scattered pieces of their spaceship. They'd have to do so while escaping a bizarre set of Earthlings, including massive hamsters in balls,



When talking about individual influential games, *Rogue* must come high up on the list. While first-person shooters have shed the "Doom clone" description, the term "roguelike" is still used to describe a subset of role-playing games, and it's a subgenre with a rich history. If asked to name them, classical examples such as *Moria* and *NetHack* would come to mind quickly and followers of modern indie games could easily offer *FTL: Faster Than Light* and *Don't Starve*.

ToeJam & Earl, though definitely inspired by *Rogue*, would come rather further down the list of names most people would come up with. It's not hard to see why – to the casual observer, the unusual characters and setting are typical of Nineties mascot platform games and that route was explored by the game's sequel. Even for more seasoned observers, the game exhibits some very obvious departures from its inspiration. However, *ToeJam & Earl* was all about exploration, with randomly generated stages filled with enemies and packed with treasure.

It's a game born of the passions of the game's designer, Greg Johnson, who was a big fan of them. "Often we build the games that we want to play ourselves," says Johnson. "I have always loved games with random maps and randomly placed objects and characters. I remember I wanted that *Rogue* experience that I loved, but I wanted something faster paced and with more action. I love surprise, so that's what *TJ&E* became."

While *Rogue* is the only game that Johnson cites as an influence, he had ideas of his own to add to the formula, as he explains. "I also really wanted to make a game that would deliver a great two-player experience, as I like playing games with others." Johnson's decisions were not only focused on the end product, but the experience that would be had in making it. "Making a random two-player game is

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boogeymen and devils, and it's here that much of the game's humour is to be found. It's a classic gaming trope turned on its head – far from being a hostile invading force, *ToeJam* and *Earl* are laid-back aliens who desperately want to leave Earth and return to their home planet of Funkotron.

It's here that *ToeJam & Earl* is most different from its inspiration – not only is combat real-time, but generally discouraged. "*ToeJam & Earl* really was more about finding ways to evade enemies than to fight them – rose bushes, decoys, hi-tops, wings, teleporting doors," Johnson confirms. While the



The small sprites don't convey their characters as well as later games.

EARL AND MYSELF ARE
HIGHLY FUNKY ALIENS





WHAT THEY SAID...



A most triumphant excursion of cerebral excellence. Dig?

Sega Pro,
November 1991



characters did occasionally gain access to tomatoes that could be hurled at the hostile citizens of Earth, the evasive items that Johnson mentions greatly outnumber offensive options.

Just as *ToeJam & Earl* is not the first game that comes to mind when thinking of roguelikes, the Mega Drive – known in the USA as the Genesis – is not an obvious choice of platform. It's rather better known for its platform games and arcade conversions than slower-paced games of exploration. And though it seems a little odd with hindsight, at the time choosing Sega could have been perceived as a very bold move. Though the Mega Drive was faring better than its predecessor, these were the pre-*Sonic* days, when Nintendo was still unchallenged as the dominant force in the worldwide console market. Sega was still something of a minnow and hadn't yet developed a solid international presence – the company's US office still only employed roughly 20 people

For Johnson though, it was a question of corporate ethos rather than sales potential. "It seemed obvious at the time," he explains. "Sega was making interesting

and unusual games back then. I think the Genesis was the right platform for *ToeJam & Earl*." Maintaining friendly relationships with third-party developers was one of the ways in which Sega sought to differentiate itself from its rival, and Johnson remembers good working relationships with the company. "The folks at Sega were great to work with. We had the best

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producers ever – Scott Berfield and later Bert Schroeder. They were both awesome."

ToeJam & Earl saw players taking control of one of the game's aliens to explore a series of stages, which took place across a collection of floating islands. While there was a fixed stage mode for players who enjoy memorisation and repetition, the game's primary mode randomly generated stages from pre-defined segments. It was an idea that Johnson and Voorsanger had presented to Sega with a selection of cards with level segments drawn on them, alongside mock screenshots. The islands weren't just connected horizontally by both hidden and visible pathways, but vertically – levels were stacked atop one another and accessed by an elevator. Falling from above can allow you to explore areas otherwise inaccessible, which was key as progression in the game's level system relied on exploration.



While exploration is key, spaceship parts are not kept hidden – indeed, they're literally signposted.

Not that it was anything so dull as a “level system” – ToeJam and Earl were never level 2, they started out as Weiners who eventually became Dudes and – if you were good – Funklords. A handy map provided players with the tools to chart their progress, and even if you’d found an elevator to exit the stage, it was often worth revealing more of the map in order to bring the next level a little closer.

Earthlings were the antagonists of the game. Their ranks comprised of both exaggerated caricatures of human society and bizarre, off the wall enemies. Lawnmower-wielding men and bees were among the most ordinary of the enemies, with others including a drill-crazy dentist and herds of nerds. More bizarre were the mailbox monster, the army of chickens and the phantom ice-cream van.

As well as searching for parts of their broken spaceship and avoiding Earthlings, ToeJam and Earl needed to seek presents, which would aid them in their search. Hi-top trainers could enhance speed, boomboxes distracted enemies and delicious junk food refilled health. Despite this not all items were beneficial, and you’d need to use them in order to identify them, or else find and pay the man in the carrot suit to do so on your behalf. Presents were also randomised at the start of each game, but could be spotted from their wrapping once identified.

While the Mega Drive was a powerful format for its time, the game wasn’t without technical challenges. The game’s design called for dynamic split-screen play, in which the screen would split and recombine when ToeJam and Earl drifted apart and reunited. To say that it was ambitious would be an understatement, as Sega had actually declared the effect to be impossible on the hardware. Reflecting on how the game may have played out without it, Johnson notes the decisions made in its sequel, which didn’t feature



■ Presents that haven't been used yet are represented with question marks, keeping the contents hidden.

it. “The two characters would push on the sides of the screen if they wanted to go opposite ways. Also if one of the characters fell off the screen they could teleport back on again.” Johnson’s preferred approach is clear, as he declares, “the split screen is way more fun.”

“The split-screen feature was quite a challenge,” recalls Johnson, “but quite honestly I never worried about the technical challenges too much because I had so much faith in my partner, Mark Voorsanger.” Johnson’s faith was well-placed, as Voorsanger managed to work out a way of implementing it. It was a challenge well worth overcoming, as the co-op mode proved to be the heart of the game. With two players, the personality that Johnson and Voorsanger had strived for came to the fore. ToeJam and Earl spoke to each other through on-screen text and could interact to the benefit of the players. Moving the duo close to one another allowed them to high-five, exchanging a little health to help the trailing player, and players could even donate a life to their dead partner to allow for continued



■ Differing types of terrain affected movement speed – roads speed the character up, while sand slows them down.

Sequel shock

■ ToeJam & Earl’s sequel, *Panic On Funkotron*, was a drastic departure from the original game. Recast as typical platform game mascots, the duo returned to Funkotron following the events of the original game, only to find that they had brought a horde of Earthlings back with them. Having caused the problems, the aliens were required to capture the Earthlings and ship them back home.

In design terms, this meant searching for enemies in platform stages, pelting them with jars and taking them to the spaceship at the end of the stage. Seeking the exploration key to the original game, many of the Earthlings were hidden. The sequel was a good platform game and reviewed well, but has received retrospective criticism for abandoning the formula of the original game.

While he’s proud of the sequel on its own merits, Greg Johnson has expressed his regret over the drastic change in style, feeling that it was too different to the first to connect with fans. “Stick to your guns if you believe in what you’re making, even if your publisher doesn’t.”



■ A beat-matching mini-game made repeat appearances, foreshadowing the emergence of the rhythm action genre.



■ The improved graphics and large sprites helped players to connect with the game’s characters and setting.

REVISITING THE FORMULA

■ Though the second *ToeJam & Earl* game was a straightforward mascot platform game, Johnson and Voorsanger were able to revisit the original game's design over a decade later in *ToeJam & Earl III: Mission To Earth*. Originally planned for the Dreamcast, Sega's collapse as a hardware manufacturer caused the game to move to Microsoft's Xbox. The original design seen in the leaked Dreamcast prototype was very close to being a 3D remake of *ToeJam & Earl*, with returning enemies and presents. Some new elements had been

added, including a new female character called Latisha. "We added more ways you could fight back – you could shoot notes to funky Earthlings, for example," adds Johnson. "I'd be interested to know what players really thought of the difference."

These elements of the game carried over to the final Xbox version of the game, but arrived alongside less welcome elements. "We were told by Visual Concepts (Sega's representatives) to model our game after *Donkey Kong 64*," Johnson explains. As a result, the game's progression

structure was drastically changed from the original model, with linear progression removed in favour of hub worlds and key collection. Mini-games were also added, further removing the game from the original design. The result was a product which received only a lukewarm critical reception. With long-term fans put off by the new additions and newcomers generally baffled by the game, *ToeJam & Earl III: Mission To Earth* launched to underwhelming retail performance and became the final game in the series.



WHAT THEY SAID...



If Sega think this is what "Ver Kids" want, then they're sorely mistaken

ACE,
February 1992



play. Better yet, the split-screen play enabled players total independence of movement, even allowing them to exist on different stages should one of them fall down.

Once the split-screen system had been worked out, work progressed relatively smoothly. "Pretty early in our development we got the game to a playable state," Johnson explains. "The two of us put many, many hours into playing it before it was released and that gave us lots of opportunity to tweak it and tune it." The tuning produced a refined game that contained a lot to like, but one which was by no means flawless.

"The game can be pretty darned frustrating at times," Johnson confesses. He's not overstating it. Some of the negative presents were among the most infuriating misfortunes to be inflicted upon players of any game. Summoning an Earthling was relatively mild, as compared to picking up the Total Bummer, which instantly killed your character and, if they were present on screen, your partner's character too. But perhaps the most frustrating of all was the Randomizer, an item which not only cleared all of your existing present identifications, but re-randomised the sprite associations. Johnson doesn't get tremendously hung up on the problems of the past, though. "Looking back there are still many things I would change, but heck, hindsight is always so terribly easy."

One thing that certainly wouldn't change is the game's music. As is to be expected from a game that takes so many cues from music culture, audio is a key part of the game's appeal. John Baker composed the game's theme tune, which became so iconic that it ended up being one of the few elements of the original game that was retained in its 1993 sequel. The soundtrack was of such importance that the Jam Out sound test mode was present on the main menu, as opposed to being buried in the options menu.

As development entered its late stages, the friendly relationship with Sega nearly resulted in much bigger things for ToeJam and Earl as characters. "Sega was actively searching for a mascot, or mascots. They



Mailbox monsters serve as hidden threats, as the game also includes regular, helpful mailboxes.

needed something for their company branding," recalls Johnson. Sega had a variety of recognisable arcade hits under its belt, but its mascot Alex Kidd could never rake in cash like *Mario* did for Nintendo. For a brief time, it looked like the interstellar duo might take his place thanks to support from Sega's offices in the USA, but this never came to pass.

"We got pretty excited at the prospect, and the folks at Sega who supported the idea were genuine," Johnson explains. "Unfortunately, like most game companies that have their home base in Japan, it's really Japan that calls the shots, and *Sonic* came from a Japanese company and felt more Japanese. It may be that we never really had a shot, but we thought we did." It evidently stung a little – if you explore a little during that game's closing stroll around Funkotron, you'll meet an alien who remarks on the lack of hedgehogs in the area.

When *ToeJam & Earl* was released in 1991, it received a generally positive response. The game's sense of humour was appreciated and critics recognised the fact that the game offered a different experience to the majority of Mega Drive games. Aspects singled out for particular praise were the

> A GAMING EVOLUTION

Rogue > ToeJam & Earl > Banjo-Kazooie



Rogue's random generation of levels and exploratory gameplay surely had an influence on the creation of *ToeJam & Earl*.



Exploration and item collection heavily featured in many of Rare's N64 games, the tale of a bird and a bear included.



game's music and its dynamic split-screen co-op. "I'm surprised more people haven't done that since then," Johnson reflects. "I'm actually thinking of making another game with a dynamic split screen right now. It makes for a really great two-player, on-the-couch experience."

But while critical reception of *ToeJam & Earl* scored well on average, the game proved divisive, drawing particularly strong criticism from some reviewers. One of the most unfriendly reviews came from the magazine *ACE*, whose 1/5 review claimed that "Boring really doesn't quite sum up the toe-curling tedium of the whole debacle." Even the positive reviews included caveats for players who might find the game's offbeat nature off-putting.

"I have thought a lot about that over the years," Johnson tells us. "It's particularly relevant to me now because I recently released a game for Sony called *Doki Doki Universe*, and it had mixed reviews that were very similar to the reviews I got on *ToeJam & Earl*, long ago. I certainly could have taken a more straight and typical path to building a roguelike game. Another group did that shortly after *TJ&E* came out. Their game was called *Diablo* and they made piles and piles more money than we did." Indeed, *ToeJam & Earl* was not an immediate success and struggled to find an audience. Initial sales were very low, meaning that the game relied on word of mouth to build to its eventual cult success. With that outcome in mind, **Games™** was curious to know if Johnson would have chosen Blizzard's route if he was given the choice.

"Would I have changed places with them? Sometimes I wish that I wasn't so darned quirky and just built games for the mainstream," he concedes. "But then every time I start a new game, that feels too dry and too boring." It's a somewhat sad statement to hear, but Johnson's next statement is rather more reassuring. "Thankfully there are enough quirky people out there who appreciate something off the

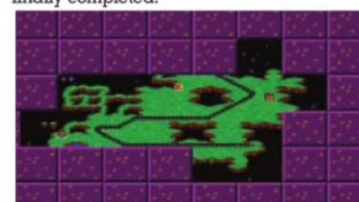
wall and different. I don't think I would change *ToeJam & Earl*."

Nevertheless, *ToeJam & Earl*'s struggles at retail caused a lack of enthusiasm for a straight sequel from Sega, which was concerned that it could not adequately sell the game. Work on this more traditional sequel was abandoned and *ToeJam & Earl: Panic On Funkotron* became a conventional mascot platform game, with only traces of the exploration-based action that defined its predecessor. Johnson and Voorsanger would not return to the original *ToeJam & Earl* formula until 2002's *ToeJam & Earl III: Mission To Earth*.

Johnson is still an active developer with HumaNature Studios and he continues to apply the lessons learned through his experience with *ToeJam & Earl*. "A really fun game can be built with just two people – you don't need a huge team," he advises. "Don't change the style of your sequels too much or you confuse your user base," he continues, in practical fashion. "Crank up the funky tunes while you work, and play test like crazy, then you'll end up with a game that's more fun to play," he concludes, providing the answer that seems most key to *ToeJam & Earl*'s appeal.



10 parts of ToeJam and Earl's spaceship must be recovered for the game to be finally completed.



The game's map served not only to highlight previously visited areas, but potential places to gain points and level up.



Small snippets of dialogue appeared whenever ToeJam and Earl reconvened on the same screen.



Characters left alone for a small period of time will fall asleep, responding only after being woken with button-mashing.