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MULTIMEDIA • John Romero

HE DESIGNS BIZARRE, VIOLENT GAMES FOR THE ULTIMATE PLAYER: HIMSELF.

by KATHRYN JONES SEPTEMBER 1998



JOHN ROMERO IS THE REIGNING BAD BOY of computer gaming, an image he cultivates with his flowing black hair, devilish smile, passion for fast cars (he's a self-described "maniac" behind the wheel of his Ferrari Testarossa), and thirst for bloody fights to the death—on-screen, of course. At thirty, he's also one of the few recognized stars in the business for designing Quake and Doom, complex three-dimensional games that take players into macabre worlds filled with fantastic monsters and lots of gore.

Romero helped create those games while at id Software, the Mesquite company he co-founded in 1991, but today he runs his own shop, ION Storm, and he's once again letting his twisted imagination run wild. He has spent the past year and a half designing his dream game, Daikatana, a time-traveling, globe-girdling epic with richly textured 3-D settings, eighty monsters, 24 weapons, and a stirring soundtrack—even dialogue. "There's tons of ambience," Romero told me in his glass-enclosed office on the fifty-fourth floor of a downtown Dallas skyscraper. "It will look and feel kind of like a movie." Indeed, Romero has been likened to directors Quentin Tarantino, Joel Coen, and David Lynch for his bizarre, violent vision; he just works on a much smaller screen. Given his reputation, the release of Daikatana—which should be in stores this Christmas—has triggered a frenzy somewhat akin to the hype over the final episode of *Seinfeld*. Computer gaming magazines have already devoted cover stories to it, and the early buzz is that it's bound to be a hit. "A good game designer knows exactly why a game design is good or bad," Romero says. "I've been doing this for eighteen years, and I know how to play games. I know what's good and bad." And Daikatana, he says, is "awesome."

If that sounds like so much bluster, consider that Romero has spent more than half of his young life playing and programming computer games. While growing up in Tucson and Northern California, he was a video game junkie, hooked on Pac-Man and the like. He taught himself a computer language so that he could write his own games on an Apple II computer, then got a chance to use those skills during his years in high school, when he lived on



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the Royal Air Force base in Alconbury, England. While his stepfather worked on a U.S. spy plane project, he helped pilots tweak the graphics on a classified computer simulation. He also wrote games and sold them to magazines for Apple hobbyists.

Romero's first job in the gaming industry was in 1987 at Origin Systems. But his big break came two years later when he took a programming job at Softdisk Publishing in Shreveport, Louisiana. There he met developers John Carmack, Adrian Carmack (no relation), and Tom Hall, who together wrote the first three games in the Commander Keen series. After they got their first royalty check for the game, they left Softdisk and founded id Software, where they shook up the industry with the groundbreaking Nazi-killing game Wolfenstein 3D, then Doom, Doom II, and Quake. But the philosophies of id's co-founders came to clash, and in August 1996 Romero quit, citing "creative differences." In November of that year he and Hall founded ION Storm along with two defectors from the Richardson software developer 7th Level, designer Todd Porter and art director Jerry O'Flaherty. Romero downplays the split with id, now a competitor, saying that he wanted to focus on game design while id was concentrating on technology. Anyway, he notes, ION Storm has lots of competitors, especially in the Dallas area, which is a hotbed for new gaming companies.

One edge Romero has over his rivals is that his company hasn't had to struggle for cash. In 1996 San Francisco-based software publisher Eidos Interactive gave ION Storm a \$13 million advance against the sales of its first three titles (more money has been advanced since). That has allowed Romero and his colleagues to be creative and not worry about the bottom line until their products hit the store. Already that relationship has produced one title, Dominion: Storm Over Gift 3, a real-time science-fiction strategy game that Porter began at 7th Level; it shipped in May.

But the company's reputation—and Romero's—is riding on Daikatana. It's not just a game to him; he has created his own world inside a computer. The player, assuming the persona of a weapons master, travels through four time periods: Kyoto, Japan, in A.D. 2455, ancient Greece, the Dark Ages, and San Francisco in A.D. 2030. The object is to change history by recovering the Daikatana, a magical samurai sword and time-travel device, saving the world from an evil madman. The main character has two sidekicks, one of whom is an intelligent woman—a rarity in the testosterone-dominated game scene (although she does have enormous breasts). A team of twenty designers, including artists hired from Marvel Comics and Raven Software, incorporated authentic details into the interiors. The segment in ancient Greece, for instance, draws the player into a gorgeous mosaic-tiled temple with a reflecting pool; computer-generated tapestries hang in a castle in the Dark Ages segment. "Pretty cool, huh?" Romero says as he navigates the 3-D rooms. "Stuff no one has ever seen before."

The real test of any computer game, though, is whether it's so engrossing that hard-core gamers will become addicted and get their friends hooked. Romero has already convinced the ultimate player: himself. "This," he says with a sly grin, "is just a lot more fun."

Kathryn Jones wrote about both Dolph Briscoe and the Matador Ranch in the August 1998 issue of Texas Monthly.

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