

GAMEINFORMER

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Spider-Man, the character Lizard and Mysterio TM & © 2003 Marvel Characters, Inc. Spider-Man, the movie, © 2003 Columbia Pictures Industries, Inc. All Rights Reserved.

COVER STORY 1 **32 SPIDER-MAN 2**

With a movie sequel in production, did you think Spidey would pull a no-show in the gaming world? You must be insane. Spider-Man 2 promises a fully swinging city rivaling GTA in scope and brand new (realistic) web physics.



COVER STORY 2 **39 TONY HAWK'S UNDERGROUND**

Let's whine together, "Annootherrr Tony Hawk game?" Ahh, young Padawan learner, this one is different: You are the pro skater. Your character starts in the Jersey 'burbs, gets sponsored, and makes the big cash - if you successfully complete the objectives.



FEATURE **46 SPHINX AND THE SHADOW OF SET**

An adventure game of biblical proportions! Okay, the only Bible tie-in is the whole ancient Egyptian setting. While your guy is usually a human/feline hybrid, the game isn't called Sphinx by accident. What's the secret?



FEATURE **52 RATCHET & CLANK: GOING COMMANDO**

With a title like "Going Commando," a whole list of innuendos come to mind. For instance, is it Ratchet or Clank that is losing his shorts? Or, have they joined a clandestine paramilitary group? You'll have to read it to find out.





SPHINX

AND THE SHADOW OF SET

The Unraveling of THQ's Riddle

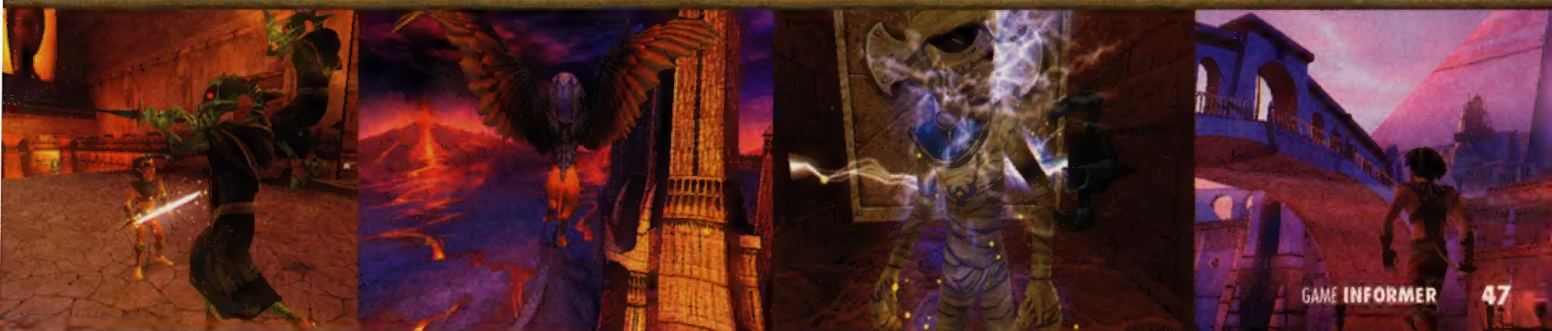
"Sphinx is kind of like a retelling of Egyptian history," says the game's producer Rob Loftus. "It's like, 'Well this could have happened, here it is.' Why is there this big Sphinx in the desert? What's the story behind that? Well, this could be it." Given the already rich history of ancient Egypt, Sphinx's use of this source material produces an almost endless well of inspiration from which to draw upon and play with. How limitless? Try interplanetary travel, the resurrection of King Tutankhamen, and the wrath of the sun god Ra. From which history book did developer Eurocom get these outlandish tales?

These fantastic elements are a good beginning for the title; but unfortunately, the boundaries of video game genres and technology still stand in the way. While filling in the gaps of history is no

easy task for the imagination; providing a solid, yet intriguing, structure for the player is even harder. Dual protagonists; large, puzzle-laden environments; and character morphing are nothing new to gamers these days, and it is becoming harder than ever to capture the attention of a public spoiled for choice – especially when you're dealing with this genre.

Interestingly, to create a compelling video game experience, Eurocom has chosen not to start at the end and add layers of gameplay upon what we already take for granted within an action/puzzle title, but to instead concentrate on perfecting the conventions of the genre above all else. This is not easy work, and it entails starting at the beginning – an origin that goes back thousands of years.

■ **FORMAT** PLAYSTATION 2/GAMECUBE ■ **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION/ADVENTURE ■ **PUBLISHER** THQ ■ **DEVELOPER** EUROCOM
ENTERTAINMENT SOFTWARE ■ **RELEASE** SEPTEMBER





Here we see a perfect balance of Sphinx's combat and problem solving components



The game possesses a very fluid combat system centered on the three-hit combo

Shrouded in mystery and clouded by the literal and figurative sands of time, ancient Egypt is almost more intriguing for the questions it raises, rather than what we actually know about it. What secrets of the afterlife did the Egyptians possess? How could such a great empire fall? How did an ancient civilization get the engineering knowledge to build extraordinary structures like the Great Pyramids? Sphinx endeavors, in its own way, to solve some of these mysteries.

In Eurocom's alternate history, an ancient Egyptian Universal Empire existed which spanned several worlds apart from ours. Transportation devices called Solar Disc portals permitted travel between these kingdoms. Communication and cultural/technological exchange fueled the empire and made it prosper. Unfortunately, this harmony was disrupted, and some worlds became isolated while others struggled to keep in contact. As time went on, memory grew dim, knowledge of the old empire faded, and these civilizations grew to believe that they had existed and evolved in a vacuum. Lately, however, strange occurrences have taken place in the once-connected worlds. The formerly great satellites of the empire have truly fallen. War has torn apart villages, foreign beings have appeared, and there are rumors of a great destructive force laying waste to entire lands. Amid the descending darkness lives hope born from a legend prophesizing that two forces are trying to recapture the kingdom of worlds – one of dark, and the other of light. Where then, is the opposition to this wave of evil?

The game starts out with our hero Sphinx discovering and using one of the Solar Disc portals to travel to the world of Abydos. Here we witness the betrayal and death of King Tutankhamen by the hand of his brother. His body is mummified and entombed in Uruk – a fortress built by the evil god Set. In his design to harness the power of the worlds, Set has constructed the Eye of Ra, a powerful beam that destroys anything in its path. Sphinx learns that, to thwart this evil, he must collect crowns that exist in each of the satellites of the empire. His journey begins at Uruk.

While Sphinx may appear to be a platformer where you collect objects, Eurocom wants nothing of the sort. "We don't want it to feel like a FedEx run, you know?" quips

Loftus. As a man who usually doesn't speak sarcastically or with much exaggeration (he rattles off his producer credits – the Red Faction and Summoner franchises – as if he was telling us what he ate for breakfast), Loftus' comment speaks to this title's core principles. "This is not a platform game," he declares. "There are platform elements, but it's an adventure game. It's designed to feel like there's exploration and you're finding things and solving a puzzle that's all very localized. This way, we can put a lot of detail in the environment immediately, and really make it feel like an exploration and not just running around collecting bolts."

Sphinx aims to combine the visual impact and some of the freedom of a Jak and Daxter or Ratchet & Clank, without overwhelming the player with technology for technology's sake. As such, the game is designed so there is a seamless merging of problem solving and action, with a rhyme and reason for both. States Loftus, "You have to concentrate on your genre and what makes your game really satisfying. In Sphinx, it's the combat and the puzzle solving. So, we need to make that really, really cool to begin with. We have to make the environmental puzzles really cool and punctuate it with all this action. We are going to concentrate on delivering a really good game in this genre first, and then we're going to polish the hell out of it."

"We don't want it to feel like a FedEx run, you know?"

– Producer Rob Loftus



Sphinx uses a Legend of Zelda-inspired icon system that is well suited for both characters



This title requires many means to take your journey to its conclusion

The bridge between Eurocom's desire to blend environmental problem solving and the action that gamers crave comes down to the title's two characters: Sphinx and the mummy form of King Tut. It may seem forced (yet natural) to give combat to Sphinx and leave the puzzles to the weaker character. However, the developer wants to avoid such an obvious assignment of responsibilities. Thus, not only will both protagonists perform a variety of tasks in the game; they won't be bound to rely on each other to get through a level. Instead, the mummy's adventure will be a separate but ongoing storyline occurring in conjunction with Sphinx's journey. Loftus puts the balance of gameplay among the two to be about 70 percent to 30, with the player controlling Sphinx most of the time. "He's kind of like this outer-world persona. He's not a god per se, but to the people in the world that he's adventuring in, he definitely has these god-like qualities," explains Loftus.

Eurocom has planned for the game to evolve around the burgeoning abilities of Sphinx as he progresses. He first discovers the use of a sword that is formed out of thin air, and soon adds a handy blowgun to his arsenal. Like many elements of this game, there is an instinctual usefulness to this latter weapon. It also serves to activate key switches from a distance in a first-person view. Eventually, an energy shield will become available, as well as the ability to transform into the Sphinx itself – a form known as the Wrath of Ra. This will be used to navigate through some airborne portions of the game. Sphinx's various weapons can be called upon with a handy Legend of Zelda-like mapping system.

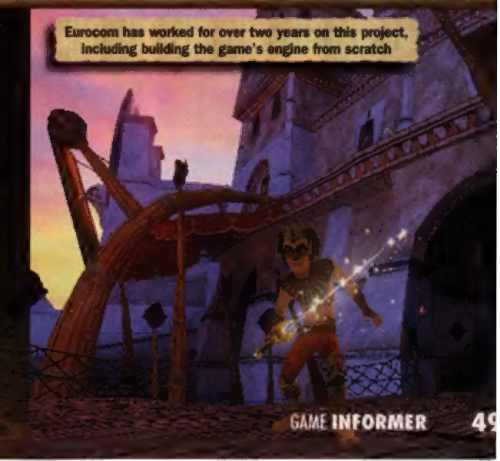
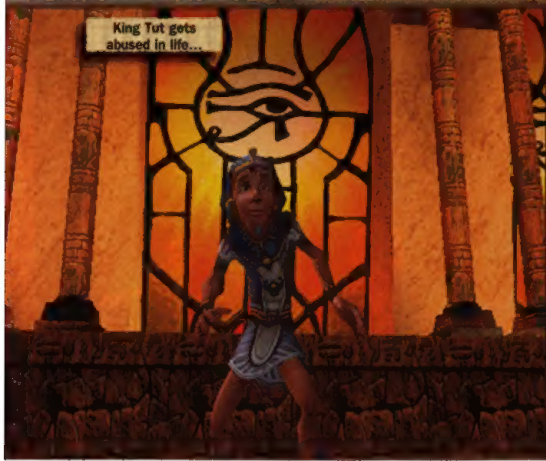
The mummy, on the other hand, is the complete opposite of Sphinx – something that the developers always intended, but which became more and more important to take advantage of as the project took shape. Says Loftus, "We always wanted to do sort of two different characters, and when we started putting in some of the mummy's gameplay, we thought, 'This guy's really, really cool, and he's a nice break from Sphinx. His puzzles are completely different.'"

In comedy, you need the outrageous character to balance the straight man. "Whereas Sphinx is the swashbuckling hero," Loftus explains, "the mummy is the frail dead guy. And the cool thing about the mummy is that he's already dead, so we can do lots of cool things to him just to abuse him. That's how his puzzle solving actually works. You literally abuse the poor guy to accomplish your goal. He'll never have a weapon; he's not the kind of guy to fight, he's too frail." Therefore, the former King Tut will do things like split into three different personas, turn into a bat, or electrocute himself, to accomplish his tasks. For example, in one situation, he must turn himself into a slow (but heavy) rock form to depress a certain ground switch. Loftus is quick to remind us, however, of the game's overriding theme of balance. The mummy's segments are much more problem

"...we can do lots of cool things just to abuse him."

– Producer Rob Loftus

solving oriented, but account for less of the adventure as a whole. "We didn't want to do too much mummy because [he's] pretty much comic relief. When you think of *Star Wars* and C-3PO and R2-D2, and how they work, they work pretty well as interludes, but then you think of the new *Star Wars* and how they had a lot of Jar Jar Binks in it..."



There is nothing more banal to Eurocom than the notion of the lever. Instead of just pulling one and backtracking to some now-open door, the team has have adopted a more natural structure for Sphinx's puzzles. Nothing exemplifies this like the player's first level with the mummy at Uruk. As he walks into a wide-open chamber, you are confronted with a variety of stimuli: doorways, water pedestals, alcoves high above the player, and much more. It seems overwhelming at first, but that's just what the developer intends. "It's a total teaser concept. We want the player to see all these different places and say, 'Well gosh, how do I get there?' and then have to figure something out or master some sort of ability before they can go to some certain spot." For



Sphinx's diminutive scale compared to his foes makes combat even more exciting

instance, in the course of maneuvering this particular junction, you'll have been set on fire and flattened into a hilarious 2D, paper-thin wafer as you set about solving the room's conundrum – one that also involves travelling to several other areas.

As we watched Loftus tackle the right sequence of events, we were amazed not only by the intricate nature of all of the puzzle's parts, but also by its sheer magnitude. Even for someone who knows what to do already like Loftus, performing the right chain of moves took some time – and that's part of its beauty. Unlike a riddle in the Resident Evil series where you hit some buttons, solving one of Sphinx's conundrums isn't a joyless task. You'll physically enjoy performing the answer as much as you did figuring it out. An example of this (and an instance where the puzzle is more in tune with the environment) is an area we saw where Sphinx had to pull stairwells out of the wall in the correct order, then run and hop across them before they retracted. If you tugged on them out of sequence, you wouldn't have time to cross. If Eurocom has its way, you'll never want to pull another lever in your life.

As a reprieve from Sphinx's riddles, the title has also put together a fairly attractive combat system. The first thing you'll notice is how fluid it is. The team opted not to use a traditional lock-on mechanism. "There is a targeting system, but we don't want you to notice it. We want you to be able to make contact fairly easily," says Loftus. Still, he doesn't believe that Sphinx should be a cakewalk, either. "I don't think the combat should be watered down," he emphasizes. "Look at Zelda [The Legend of Zelda: The Wind Waker].



Great game, but I don't think I've died once yet. I kind of feel like I'm more challenged by its puzzles than its combat, and in this particular game, we want to challenge the player in battle, too." As with all other aspects of this title, Eurocom stresses that it is trying to harmoniously marry differing concepts into something that the player will feel is natural. For instance, the puzzles are instinctive and organic, but not so frequent as to crowd out the fluid combat. Perhaps a good example of this philosophy is the game's boss battles. Loftus wouldn't give away any secrets, but he assured us that the big baddies won't just be "a hack n' slash kind of guy with tons of hit points." Players will often have to use the environment around them to bring down these brutes.



Here, you'll start out by transferring electricity (upper left) to activate a launcher in the center of the room (upper right). The mummy will be launched out of the cobra heads to upper platforms in the room (lower right). These lead to other areas where you'll be set on fire, for example (lower left). Here, you'll find keys, which you bring back to the original room to reconfigure the launcher. Your 2D mummy form will also come in to play later on.



Just as the different gameplay elements of Sphinx are blended well, Eurocom is working to keep the title visually seamless. First off, similar to the aforementioned opening chamber facing the mummy, the developer wants to make sure that the areas you see in the environment are available for exploration. While you won't be able to walk just anywhere, you do get glimpses of things to come. For example, while high atop the fortress of Uruk – a structure akin (visually and mood-wise) to director Peter Jackson's vision of Sauron's menacing tower of Barad-dûr – you can see deep, fiery chasms below you. In a future level, you'll explore those trenches while in your flying Sphinx form.

This kind of vertical design is also repeated in other areas, such as the jungle lands of Sakkara – where treetop huts are littered under the forest canopy. While it would seem more impressive to give the player free reign of such attractive worlds, Loftus doesn't think that being able to go wherever you want is necessarily the best. "I think there really is [a balancing point with having too much freedom]. With a game like Jak and Daxter, you have to give the player that kind of freedom because it's a platform game and you need to run around and collect things all over the place. But, I think you can bite off too much." It will be interesting to see how players respond to the developer's "less is more" attitude. There's definitely a lot to do, but it will be scaled down compared to some of Sony's more sprawling adventures.

That's not to say your adventures in any one particular area won't be lengthy. We've already mentioned some of the mummy's exploits, and Sphinx's sections are no less intense. While at Uruk, we witnessed our hero navigate outside the main tower, as well as explore numerous chambers inside it – all the while battling some of the game's 100-plus enemies. Along the way, you can even pick up a sidequest or two. Sphinx has a multitude of NPCs, and many of them offer diversions. These range from your standard search missions to combat challenges to even minigames.

Amazingly, Eurocom says that there will be no load time to hinder your progress. Loftus explained to us how to get the best of both worlds – quantity and quality: "You can design your levels in a way that

"We're not afraid to admit that we don't know everything."

– Producer Rob Loftus

you don't have to suffer from [loading]. In this particular engine [designed by Eurocom itself], we can push a lot of polys, so it's a little bit easier, but you do have to pay attention to those things, just so we're rendering as much as we can so we can make the game very detailed. But at the same time, you don't want to have to suffer

from those long pauses." The character models are intricate enough that the developer has no fear of using them in real-time cutscenes, but when Loftus says that the game's engine can push a lot of polys, that's not all that the title achieves visually. Dynamic weather patterns whip overhead, waterfalls cascade in the background, and particles dance off of Sphinx's glowing sword in more examples of the developer's constant attention to detail.

These days, in attempting to go forward and push the envelope as far as they can, studios can easily take for granted the groundwork that is necessary to keep gamers having fun in the first place. Eurocom tells us that the title is more than halfway finished, and assured us that a large part of the remainder of the work will be in making sure that all of Sphinx's gameplay elements are in perfect balance. "We're not afraid to admit that we don't know everything," Loftus confesses. That's an admission that some developers aren't prepared to make, but it's one that spurs Eurocom toward perfecting their product, and sets Sphinx down the right path.

This world's bustling city is a good example of just how much stuff there is to do in a level



Our hero will make use of a wide assortment of physical abilities – whether it's swimming, swinging, or more



Your sword's particle effect is another small detail that makes a huge difference



Sphinx's worlds provide some intriguing contrasts, as well as great level designs

