



The lord of game developers

Peter Molyneux originated the "God game"; his newest production might be his greatest act of creation yet.

By Wagner James Au

May 5, 2000 | **O**ne day, a precocious (if somewhat peculiar) English lad mercilessly prodded an anthill with a stick, scattering hundreds of its terrified inhabitants in all directions. But he soon bored of such random ant anarchy, and began to seek satisfaction in fostering ant order: If he placed a piece of candy near the hill, for example, he learned the ants would organize themselves in formations to claim the prize.

Years later, now an adult, Peter Molyneux stands on the podium in the San Jose Civic Auditorium, a keynote speaker at the Game Developers Conference held in March. He's about to give the first

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In "Cyberselfish," Paulina Borsook denounces high-tech culture as pitiless, egotistical and

public demonstration of his keenly anticipated new game, Black and White, a game he describes as the summation of those childhood experiences and everything he's learned since, in a career of breakthrough game design. The audience of game developers is buzzing. Molyneux's work has earned him a place among England's leading pop visionaries. Indeed, in a 1997 editorial in the Guardian, Prime Minister Tony Blair himself named Bullfrog Productions, Molyneux's original game company, among the exemplars of his new Britain.

"I'm very, very nervous about showing this," Molyneux admits, three giant computer display screens looming behind him. In a medium that has become, in the years since he first entered it, a savagely competitive, multi-billion dollar industry, with budgets fast approaching those of feature films, his trepidation is understandable. As he ruefully quips to the assembled game developers -- most of them, like the industry's primary market, in their 20s or early 30s -- "You all watch MTV, but MTV has destroyed your minds completely -- [now] I have 10 seconds to impress you."

But such worries swiftly prove unfounded: Almost immediately, the first of many cheers roars through the auditorium as Molyneux begins to demonstrate the features of Black and White, a real-time strategy game in which the player is both God and Titan, with a lush kingdom to command.

As the acclaim rolls on, one gets the impression that Black and White may be, after all, the best game he's ever created, synthesizing the strongest features of his previous games, but writ large with the computing power to fully express the ideas he's always had for them.

And after years of breathless coverage by the game press, and a release date pushed back time and again, it could come none too soon. "Although it seems like the development of Black and White has taken a long time, we always knew that it was going to take over two years," he later reassures me by e-mail from Guilford, home to Lionhead Studios, his new design company. "It's just that I can't help talking about the game I'm working on from the very outset!"

With his perfectionist bent and inclination for godlike perspective, Molyneux is surely the Stanley Kubrick of computer game design. In his own medium, his status ranks as high as the late director's in his. Rob Pardo, lead designer for Blizzard Entertainment's upcoming

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WarCraft III, enthuses, "All his games have been extremely innovative in the strategy genre and [he's] one of the rare game-design visionaries who is unafraid to attempt very new game mechanics ... There are very few people in the game industry that are as innovative as he is."

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Screenshot of Black & White

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