

The History of Tex Murphy

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Introducing Tex

The year is 2039. You find yourself in a post WWII San Francisco. While most Norms, people unaffected by the mutating effects of the post-war radiation, have moved to New San Francisco, you find yourself most comfortable living among the mutants and outcasts. You are a Norm, and have found that your social anxiety disappears when around the less fortunate members of society. Dressed in a well-tailored trench coat and a soft felt fedora hat, you are a man out of your time in this newfangled futuristic setting. You are Tex Murphy, Private Investigator. What Alfred Hitchcock did for the PI genre of television, is what Tex Murphy would do for the adventure genre of PC gaming.

In 1982, a group of guys got together in Salt Lake City, Utah and decided to try to satiate the need for advanced but easy to use programs on the Commodore 64, and thus Access Software, Inc. was formed. Founded by Bruce Carver, currently the president and CEO, and Chris Jones, executive producer and vice president, Access Software, Inc. slowly began etching itself into the growing market of PC gaming. First, Carver and Jones released a flight simulator called Echelon, and after a few other nominal titles they had their first big break in July 1989 with a combination one-two punch of “Mean Streets” (the first Tex Murphy game) and “Links: The Challenge of Golf” (a very advanced 3D golf game for its time). Access is actually best known for its Links series of games, which have been the best selling golf game (in both units and dollars) since 1992. While it is the golf games that might have paid the bills, it was their wonderful adventure games that drew a crowd, when Tex Murphy (played by real-life Vice President Chris Jones) hit the scene, mystery and adventure gamers had found their pot of gold.

Mean Streets

In 1989, “Mean Streets” introduced the gaming community to Tex Murphy for the very first time. Billed as the first “interactive movie”, “Mean Streets” was essentially part side-scroller, part simulator and part traditional adventure game.

The manual fills you in on the basics- a well-loved professor named Dr. Carl Linsky has jumped to his death from the Golden Gate Bridge, and obvious suicide, case closed. His daughter, Sylvia Linsky does not believe it was a suicide and hires you, Tex Murphy, to investigate his mysterious death. Along the way, Tex find hints of insurance fraud, corporate murders and stumbles into a highly secretive project named Overlord. The game play challenges you in a variety of ways, from testing your detective skills by searching rooms, your response time by having to defend yourself and your ability to control a 21st Century hover car.

“Mean Streets”’ greatest impact was not its interesting mix of graphics and game play, though they were impressive. By far, this games greatest contribution to gaming technology was its use of Access Software’s patented RealSound technology. During the late 80’s hardware manufacturers pretty much deemed the feasibility of high quality sound from the computer as impossible. Some clever software developers had figured out ways make the standard 3” PC speaker vibrate in a way that was faster than it was

physically able to. The result? Sound which resembled high quality music; speech and what we now consider digitized sound effects.

While the advance was significant, it suffered from some compatibility and reproducibility issues when PC manufacturers began to include smaller piezo-electric tweeter speakers. At this point, Access entered with its RealSound technology which was essentially a very solid entry into the realm of digitized sound for the PC. To put the significance in perspective, understand that most of what was considered sound effects at this point was *very* simple beeps and blips of varying frequencies. Suddenly, you had a game that offered symphonic background music and digitized speech and effects-- before Sound Blaster cards were even available! In retrospect, what is impressive about the RealSound technology is that they were able to pull it off with the minimal processing power that was available. "Mean Streets" was capable of running on a 286/386 with at least 6Mhz, 640k Ram and a 256 colors display (although the manual warned that 6Mhz might present some slow downs when there were lots of graphical elements and sound). It was a great moment in time for the audio segment of computer games and for PCs as a whole. In fact, the gaming industry thought so as well, and in 1989 the Software Publishers Association (SPA) awarded Access a Codie of Best Technical Achievement for its RealSound technology.

Martian Memorandum

The year 1991 saw Tex Murphy return to an anxious bunch of dedicated followers and fanatics in "Martian Memorandum". This time, Marshall Alexander, famed industrialist and founder of the TerraForm Corporation, contacts Tex Murphy. His request? Find his missing daughter, Alexis, who has apparently been kidnapped and has taken "something else" with her. This episode takes Tex through the steaming underbellies of Earth and Mars, the latter being terra-formed by, of course, the TerraForm Corporation. As it turns out, the "something else" is an ancient Mars artifact called the "Oracle Stone" which is said to imbue its owner with magnificent powers. As Tex tracks down Alexis, he has to stop the deranged scientist Thomas Dangerfield and hopefully then be able to get a date with the attractive missing person.

While not so much a dramatic leap in its introduction of new technology, "Martian Memorandum" left its mark by allowing flexibility with, again, its sound system. By 1991, numerous technologies had entered the hardware market that promised to deliver the ideal of quality digitized sounds. Sound cards from SoundBlaster and AdLib were available and openly sought by consumers. In its' entry, "Martian Memorandum" shipped with the ability to play on, not only RealSound, but AdLib, IBM's Speech Card, SoundBlaster, and Microsoft's Sound. Obviously, this was a business decision to maintain open as much of the convoluted PC market as possible, to make as many sales as possible.

Beyond the technical aspect, "Martian Memorandum" was well received by consumers and the industry. In 1991, the SPA awarded Access Software a Codie Award for Best Fantasy Role Playing Game.

Under A Killing Moon

The third installment of the Tex Series, “Under A Killing Moon” (released 1994), has Tex once again starting off to investigate what appears to be a relatively minor burglary at a pawnshop. One thing leads to another, and Tex is hired by a certain Countess Renier to find her crystal dove statuette, which has been stolen-- not for a monetary reward, but rather something that could spell the end of the world. Before long, Tex is in the middle of a massive conspiracy, trying to stop the Brotherhood of Purity and their deadly ancient prophecies of genocide. The only way to do this is to get onto their orbiting space station, the Moon Child, and interrupt their plans.

In keeping with its pattern of innovation, Access released “Under A Killing Moon” as one of the first games that required Super VGA graphics capabilities. Up until then, most games ran on 256 colors VGA or MCGA because it was always accepted that the way to release a successful game was by having it support multiple standards. The problem with this philosophy is that the effort used to achieve compatibility draws directly from the effort that could be used to spur forward progress and innovation. Access took note of this and released a game that would set the standard of Super VGA for games, thereby showing just what miracles the young standard could produce.

While still running within MS-DOS, “Under A Killing Moon” delivered jaw-dropping graphics. For the very first time, Access had taken their promise of an interactive movie and delivered fully by immersing you as the player completely within the rich and detailed world of Tex Murphy. Now instead of having multiple external camera angles, the game was played from a first-person perspective-- you were seeing through the eyes of Tex. This was an impressive and very aggressive leap forward in game design. While the idea of first person certainly was not new to games by this time, the level of interactivity offered by “Under A Killing Moon” certainly was. Now you could literally peek under desk, open drawers and explore their contents, send and receive faxes, handle incoming videophone calls, and manipulate almost every object in the totally3D environment. Progressing in the game meant looking above things, under things, into things and over things, just like in the real world. For once, you really felt you were *in the world* and not just a spectator to it.

Again Access delivered with quality on the sound front, offering spectacular use of the now available sound hardware, but this release was really about eye-candy. All the in-game characters in “Under A Killing Moon” were digitized actors filmed in front of blue screen and then melded with the 3D rendered game world. More importantly, Access chose to pull out all the stops and hired Hollywood talent to fill in some of the roles. Among the list of names were James Earl Jones (“Star Wars”, “Field of Dreams”), Russel Means (“The Last of the Mohicans”), Margot Kidder (“Superman I, II, III”) and Brian Keith (“The Parent Trap”). Not only had they delivered a cinematic look and feel with the new perspective, but now they were also bringing Hollywood into their game, and it worked wonderfully. No player can forget the game’s introduction where James Earl Jones’ deep, rich voice reads the following lines from Edgar Allen Poe:

“No pestilence has ever been so fatal or so hideous...

Blood was its avatar and its seal—

The redness and horror of blood...”

It was an introduction which made goose bumps appear on all who listened, and it really, once and for all, demonstrated how the sensory experience of a good movie could be made interactive.

Their leap of faith into the advancement of game technology again did not go unnoticed. In 1994, the SPA gave Access a Codie Award for “Under A Killing Moon”, naming it the Best Fantasy/Adventure/Role Playing Game of the year.

The Pandora Directive

In 1996, Access followed up its Tex series with “The Pandora Directive”. This one is memorable for its box art, which read, “The Government has covered up the greatest secret of the 20th century. Tex doesn’t like secrets.” Once again our ever-misjudged PI is hired to find a missing person, a man by the name of Dr. Thomas Malloy. At first an associate, Gordon Fitzpatrick, contracted him to find Malloy. Then Malloy’s daughter, Regan, asks for his help as well. Soon, everyone seems to be looking for Malloy, even the N.S.A. Tex must find and decipher the boxes that Malloy left scattered across the continent before the others do, or the secret they contain could spell disaster for the world. Along the way, Tex stumbles across the secrets of the Roswell UFO crash, a serial killer and a massive government conspiracy.

This time, Access focused on polishing what they had done right so far, delivering a great, technologically advanced game. Just like its predecessor, “Under A Killing Moon”, “The Pandora Directive” featured real Hollywood talent including: Barry Corbin, Tanya Roberts, Kevin McCarthy, and John Agar. More importantly, though, this time Access set its focus on the demand for an interactive movie that was less linear. By 1996, most interactive movies were great for their richness, but not traditionally for their flexibility of plot. Gamers began to complain about this sort of limitation but very few companies had responded as yet to their yearnings for replay value. Access did an impressive move by making the game incorporate three different narrative paths, and seven different possible endings. To help gamers, Access also added a comprehensive in-game help and clue system, which cost points to use, but was considerably useful when in a pinch. This was another innovation that the gaming community clamored for and the Access “genie” delivered.

Access also had some polishing to do, because not many months earlier Microsoft had released its newest version of Windows, Windows 95. True to its style, Access became one of the first games to use the powerful multimedia features of Windows95, showcasing its ability to play games as smoothly as was usually expected from DOS games. In fact, Access made serious efforts to ease the users burden here—“Pandora” would play in both DOS and Windows 95, and the Windows 95 version sported extra features like crash recovery and autoplay.

Overseer

1998 saw the release of the latest Tex Murphy game: “Overseer”. The story line of “Overseer” follows that of Martian Memorandum, as it has Tex revisiting the case in thought as he tries to explain to the girl of his dreams why he still wears his wedding ring, though long since divorced. Essentially, this is a chance to revisit the familiar plot with the new and amazing technologies that have emerged in the ten years since the release of “Martian Memorandum”. Even better, it was a chance for Access to polish and fill in the details left out of the original game.

And showcase the technology it did. "Tex Murphy: Overseer" was another first from the Access team. It was the first product designed specifically for DVD, and was designed to exploit the power of the new media format. It included Dolby Digital AC-3 5 channel surround sound and high quality MPEG2 cinematics. The new format also allowed for visual improvements, since it boosted frame rates from 10-14 frames per second to an eye pleasing 30 frames per second and color palettes skyrocketed from being able to use only 256 colors to the almost infinite 17 million.

More and more, they began to incorporate the Hollywood style of producing their interactive movies. Adrian Carr, was brought aboard again to produce and direct "Overseer", having done a successful job with "The Pandora Directive". This internal decision allowed Chris Jones the flexibility of focusing on his character, Tex Murphy, and not having to deal with all the other nuances that go into filming such a large production.

Not to be out done by its' predecessors, "Overseer" included another cast of Hollywood celebrities including Michael York, Rebecca Broussard, Henry Darrow and martial arts expert Richard Norton. If it is the last Tex game, Access made sure it was an honorable one to be remembered.

Microsoft Acquires Access Software

In more recent news, in April 1999, Microsoft acquired Access Software. Under the deal, Microsoft would get ownership of the popular Links golf library of games, as well as the Tex Murphy series. Access, on the other hand, gets to continue to develop from its headquarters in Salt Lake City, Utah. The biggest change comes with the move of Access CEO Bruce Carver, who joins Microsoft to focus on the preserving and expansion of the Links franchise. In a press release from Microsoft, Carver was quoted saying, "The acquisition provides a great opportunity for Access Software. Our development team would remain in Salt Lake City, allowing us to continue our focus on producing great PC golf games while benefiting from Microsoft's global marketing and distribution resources." Indeed, the deal seems to be highly beneficial to both parties, with MS looking to improve its high-end golf market, and Access seriously improving its market position. But with all their talk, it leads you to wonder what will become of Tex and his legacy?

Ever since the acquisition of Access Software by Microsoft, Tex fans have been clamoring for the next installment of the series tentatively called "The Black Pearl". In an effort to encourage Microsoft to revive the dormant series, dedicated game sites have been circulating links to an online petition- trying to show the support that a new Tex game would receive. This is an interesting facet of game culture- it's like great games become good friends and like any good friend you want to continue to see them doing well. Who know if MS is actually paying attention?

The answer to this lies hidden within the secretive realm of Microsoft Games, but some speculation has leaked out. Over at The Unofficial Tex Murphy site (<http://www.unofficialtexmurphy.com/>) there have been some interesting rumors circulating that Tex might make his comeback debut on Microsoft's yet to be released console, the X-Box.

The Tex Evolution

With Tex as a guide, it is easy to look over his evolution as a metaphor for the evolution of the gaming industry. Adventure gaming began with text-based interfaces, which presented rich, wordy worlds and a somewhat engrossing plot. Then multimedia came into play, where consumers for the first time began to see high fidelity sound and quality videos come from their computer. Obviously, along the way Access fought factors like hardware expense, acceptance and popularity in efforts to produce the best possible game. Technologically, the history of Tex is a history of many firsts, from being the first Super VGA game to being the first DVD game. Later on, the gaming community, now comfortable with the level of visual and audio detail would press for more detailed story lines, and engrossing plots. Access responded by hiring a full time writer Aaron Conners to write the scripts for “The Pandora Directive” and “Overseer”. When the game culture complained that some games were unbeatable, Access heard their initial requests and released games that incorporated hint systems. Always, for its efforts Access was rewarded with strong sales and Codie awards. In Access’ forward-looking stance, and receptive attitude towards gamers’ wishes, one finds a circle of technological and business factors that influenced the game design, its reception and its overall success.