



THE MAKING OF... THE LAST EXPRESS

Jordan Mechner turned back time in a point'n'click classic that could be chuffing its way to Hollywood

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In 1952, Swiss author Friedrich Dürrenmatt published *The Tunnel*, a bleakly surreal short story about a train trapped in a tunnel that refuses to end. As the lights flicker and the carriages gather speed, the frightened passengers refuse to admit anything's wrong. The only exception is a corpulent, cigar-chomping student who realises the horror of the situation: they're heading towards an unspecified, existential catastrophe. "What shall we do?" screams the train's conductor in the final lines. "Nothing," replies the student with sudden serenity. Fate, he realises, isn't open to negotiation.

Jordan Mechner's 1997 adventure game *The Last Express* captures a similar sense of impending doom. Set on The Orient Express on the eve of World War I, it sends you hurtling along the tracks from Paris to

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Constantinople surrounded by Russian anarchists, German arms dealers, British spies and Serbian secret police.

You often feel harried by events beyond your control. As soon as your character, American doctor Robert Cath, arrives on the train, he's embroiled in the murder of his old friend (your first decision: stash the bloody corpse or throw it out the window?), and, as the story progresses, the intrigue closes around you like a steel trap. Confined within a couple of claustrophobic sleeping cars, you can't get off the train until Cath



Did the early-20th-century backdrop hurt sales? "We lost all the young people who didn't know about WWI and couldn't even find Austria on a map," reckons Moran

either dies or solves the mystery. Talk about existential dread.

It's a feeling that Mechner credits his co-writer Tomi Pierce, who died last year, with creating. "So much of the game's special character comes from her sense of the poetic and European culture," Mechner says. "We talked a lot about this generation that was plunged into war and lost its innocence. Being steeped in those cultural references cast a shadow over a lot of the characters in the story, a shadow that they're not yet aware of."

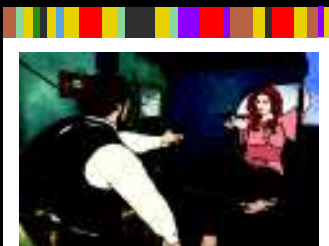
The Last Express is a Fabergé egg of a videogame. With its

opulent visuals and art nouveau style, it has incredible self-confidence. If Toulouse-Lautrec had designed games, they would have looked like this. Instead, it was actually developed by Smoking Car Productions, a company set up in 1993 by Mechner using some of the proceeds from the success of the *Prince Of Persia* franchise.

No simple adventure game, *The Last Express* is also a period drama. The WWI setting demanded a great deal of historical research into both the Orient Express's final journey before hostilities broke out and the distinctive look of the train itself (a surviving sleeper car was found in Athens and extensively photographed). But the game's



Most pre-1914 Orient Express carriages were destroyed in WWI, but the team found two compartments in Greece. "A guy tried to sell Jordan one of the cars," says Netter, "but there was no way to move it"



HOLLYWOOD EXPRESS

After taking *Prince Of Persia* to Hollywood, could Mechner be about to do the same with *The Last Express*? He won't confirm it, but director Paul Verhoeven has, describing it as "The Lady Vanishes with a dash of Indiana Jones". It's still in development, so anything could happen, but it's already raising the game's profile. "I don't know if it's coincidence, but in the last few months we've had interest from developers for making the game available for download or on mobile," says Mechner. "I think iPad would be a great platform for it."



real coup lay in its distinctive, rotoscoped animation. Building on his work in *Prince Of Persia*, which saw him videotaping his little brother doing parkour stunts in his pyjamas, Mechner decided to shoot live actors against green-screen backdrops.

"One of the reasons we went with an animated line-drawing style in *The Last Express*," he explains from his home in Los Angeles, "was because we thought it would be easier for players to project themselves into that fantasy and accept the artifice of an interactive game. Full-motion video has that distancing effect where you sit back, fold your arms and watch the scene play out. The more a game resembles film, the more photorealistic and live action it looks, the harder it is for us to accept the idea that we can actually influence or control it."

"Jordan had this theory he got from Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics*," recalls **Mark Netter**, who joined Smoking Car as the team's producer. "One of the rules in that book is about how the more photorealistic the image of the character is, the less we identify with them down to

a point where, if they're too abstract, we don't identify with them either." The idea was to give players "just enough detail that you felt like you were watching something real, but not so much that you pulled away and didn't identify with the characters."

To build the game's look, the team shot in the Cinerents West studio in San Francisco with a cast of Bay Area actors. "It wasn't like a big Hollywood set," recalls **Dunya Djordjevic**, who played heroine Anna Wolff. "It was a very creative bunch of San Francisco artists who were putting together this very passionate project." In fact, it wasn't actually a set at all. "There was no set," laughs **Karl-Heinz Teuber**, a Vidal Sassoon hairstylist and jobbing actor who provided a memorable performance as rotund, German arms dealer August Schmidt. "On the floor there was tape everywhere, marking out the train, and because we did the voiceover before we shot, we sometimes just stood and moved our mouths silently."

After shooting was finished, lead programmer **Mark Moran** processed the footage through the



To prepare for production, Mechner screened LaserDiscs of classic train movies including *The Lady Vanishes* (1938) and *Narrow Margin* (1952)



corridor in floods of tears, or Schmidt flirting awkwardly during starters in the dining car, it's difficult not to agree.

Then there are the conductors, annoyingly petty officials who will stare you right in the eye while thwarting your attempts to explore ("Monsieur, that is *not* your carriage"). The human

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rotoscoping tech they'd designed for the job. "The main technology behind it was all about taking that captured image and finding the edges, getting rid of all the detail," explains Moran. "It's about getting the key lines – which ones are important and which ones you need to throw out in order to get a cartoon version of a person." The result was an early version of performance-capture technology.

Using real people gave the game's characters astounding emotional heft. "There is no substitute for a real performance," says Netter. After seeing Tatiana, the teenage Russian aristocrat, run past you through the train's

element gives the sneaking an unusual sense of tension, while the stylised visuals avoid some of the pitfalls of FMV that mean you often feel you're passively watching – rather than interacting with – the actors.

If you'd visited the Smoking Car offices in San Francisco in 1996, there's a good chance someone would have thrown something at you and shouted "Catch!" If they did, you could consider yourself part of the family. "In our office we juggled all the time," remembers Moran. "One of the programmers taught everyone how to do it and we'd stand



Smoking Car wrote its own rotoscoping software to process the images. "Today you could do it with a series of Photoshop filters," says Moran

around having meetings juggling."

It turned out to be a pretty accurate metaphor for the team's management of live action and animation, period drama and adventure game. The team's real trick, however, was in combining the game's ambitious themes with its underlying mechanics.

Most games ask players to master movement through space. *The Last Express* is different. It requires you instead to conquer time. Playing out its events in realtime, or at least an approximation of it, the game constantly saves your progress and lets you rewind the clock at any point so you can explore different options. Do you need to have the conversation with Anna in the salon car before the train pulls into Vienna? Or should you be using the opportunity to break into her compartment?

Meanwhile, characters go about their business following a complicated set of routines. "We created a language where every character has a script," explains Moran. "They all have their motivations to drive the story forwards. At 8pm August Schmidt goes to dinner, and has dinner

until 8:30pm. He's hoping he might run into you at dinner, but if he doesn't he might see you from 8:30 to 9pm, when he's in the salon smoking. At 9:30pm he'll grow frustrated and come to your compartment and knock. He's got a long list of instructions. We created this language where we could write the instructions for every single character."

Given Mechner's temporal concerns in the *Prince Of Persia* series – from the first game's hourglass to *The Sands Of Time's* rewinding – the vicissitudes of time are clearly a recurring theme for the designer. In *The Last Express* it finds its fullest expression. No matter how you finish the game (there are several possible endings even before you reach the train's final destination), you can't escape the external, historical forces bearing down on your character. Turning back time isn't just a gameplay mechanic – it's also the source of the game's masterful thematic irony: no matter how much control you have over the clock, you remain powerless to influence the train's relentless progress.

The Last Express is the



With screenplays, casting and storyboards like this, pre-production often felt like a feature film

best game most gamers have never heard of. With total sales in the region of only 100,000 copies, you don't need a calculator to work out that Mechner was left nursing a painful loss, given its \$6m budget. So, what happened? Most obviously, the game missed its crucial Christmas '96 shipping date after testing ran over time.

That was just the beginning of the game's problems, though. Much like its eponymous train, the game collided with fate and stared into the abyss of chaos and disaster. Brøderbund, publisher of Mechner's earlier games, imploded just as *The Last Express* was released, and the title vanished after just three months of sales.

Fate may be cruel, but history puts everything into perspective. *The Last Express's* cult reputation continues to grow. The game's gorgeous visuals and emotionally affecting narrative mark it out as a work of art that can hold its head high beside any novel or movie. "Any time you make a game and release it, it's a roll of the dice, and you hope it'll be embraced by an audience," Mechner says philosophically. "We were lucky to be embraced by a small audience."



TRAVEL TIPS

Train journeys often seem full of secrets, the private lives of your fellow passengers half-revealed as you share a confined space. *The Last Express* is no exception: pass the carriage of travelling companions Sophie and Rebecca at the right moment and you'll hear a lesbian sex scene "ooh" and "ah" into life. Search Schmidt's luggage and you'll find some naughty playing cards (with Mechner's face hidden on them). "They're really juvenile Easter Eggs," confesses Moran. Then there's the moment after Cath's first nightmare. Ring the conductor's bell and you'll see the train official take his head off his shoulders and – what else? – juggle with it.

