THE MAKING OF…
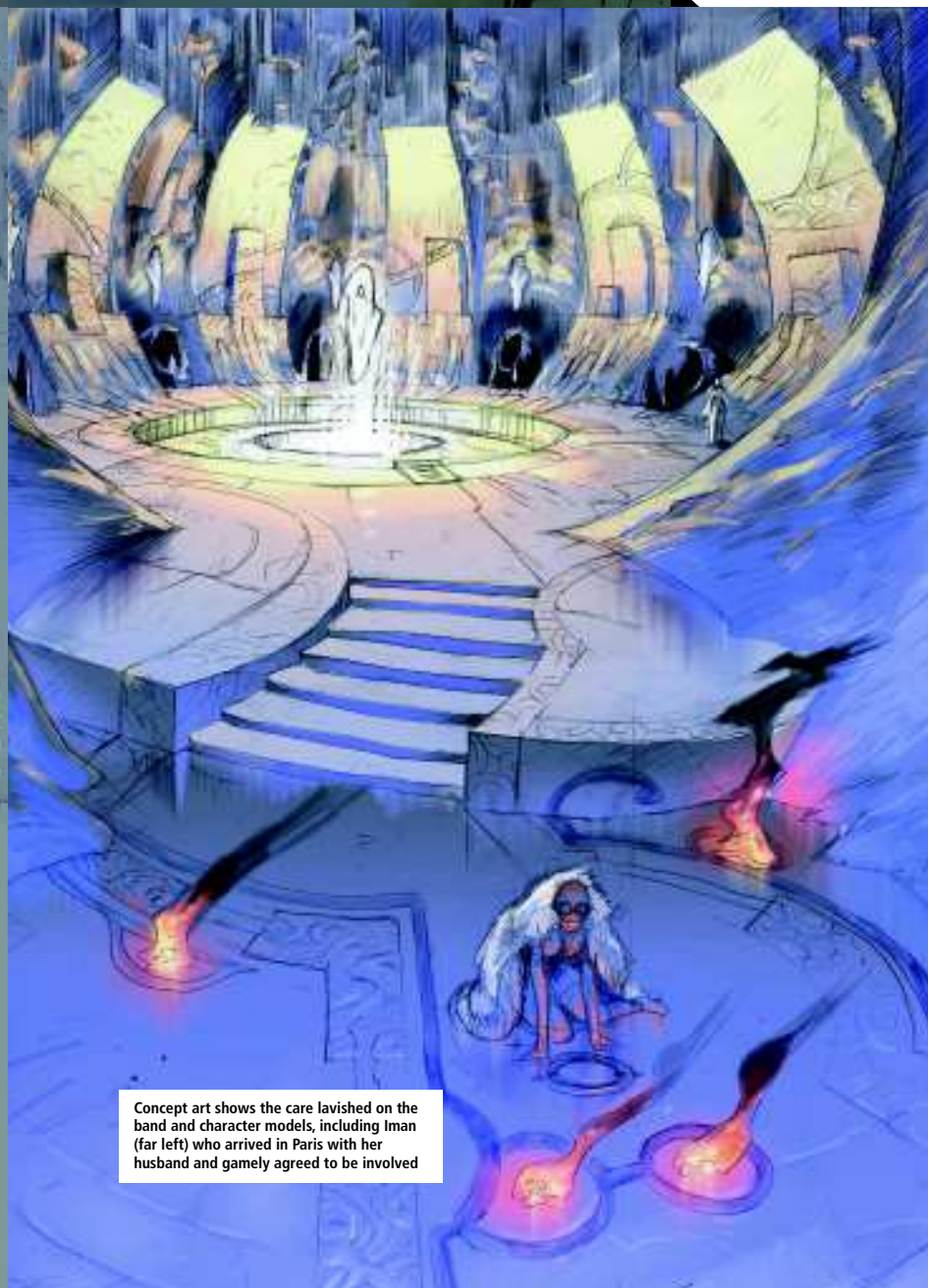## OMIKRON: THE NOMAD SOUL

When Heavy Rain auteur David Cage met David Bowie, they created a cyberspace oddity filled with soul-sucking demons, sex shops and satirical cola advertisements

FORMAT: **DC, PC** PUBLISHER: **EIDOS** DEVELOPER: **QUANTIC DREAM** ORIGIN: **FRANCE** RELEASE DATE: **1999**

French game developer **David Cage** isn't enjoying his trip on the London Underground. It's 1998 and he's southbound on the District Line. Destination: Wimbledon, home to the Lawn Tennis Association and also, more importantly, the HQ of Eidos Interactive. In a backpack he carries a PC – a monster of a machine, powerful enough to run the demo of his passion project *Omikron: The Nomad Soul*.

Cage is, understandably, on edge. The rig on his shoulder is heavy, but his hopes weigh heavier still. He desperately needs this to go well; across the Channel, Cage's start-up company Quantic Dream is running out of time.

Omikron began with an impossible vision. Cage, a professional musician with a background in commercials, wrote an initial, 200-page concept document outlining the kind of game he wanted to play.

"I was dreaming of a game with an open-world city where I could go wherever I wanted, meet anybody, use vehicles, fight and transfer my soul into another body," he tells us. "When my friends read it they said: 'David, this is impossible. It's not technically feasible, don't even think about it.'"

Visionaries don't waste time wringing their hands over something as passé as feasibility, however. It didn't matter to Cage that PC 3D cards were still in their infancy. He took the money he'd made from scoring commercials, hired a team of six friends with development experience and started production in a sound-proofed studio that once belonged to Belgian singer Jacques Brel. There were thick doors, no windows and everyone was crammed into a 15m square space.

Cage insisted on paying the team, not for altruistic reasons, but so that he could be the boss. "I wanted to be able to demand something of them, ask them to be there on time in the morning and work long days." They went into instant crunch mode, having just six months to make the impossible demo; if they didn't finish it before then, Cage would be broke and the dream would be over.

In the penultimate week of development, Cage got on the phone and asked publishers in the UK if they were interested in seeing his realtime 3D demo. Eidos said yes and when John Kavanagh, the VP of product development, saw the impossible demo with its dynamic city environment and motion-captured, canoodling pedestrians he signed Quantic Dream immediately – just three days before Cage's start-up money ran out.

Omikron: The Nomad Soul showcases more ideas in its first ten minutes than most games achieve in their entire duration.

Concept art shows the care lavished on the band and character models, including Iman (far left) who arrived in Paris with her husband and gamely agreed to be involved

Released in November 1999, two years before *Grand Theft Auto III* popularised the 3D open-world concept, *Omikron* invited players into an awe-inspiringly dynamic, futuristic city. It also featured a story about demons, hell and the transmigration of souls. "It's the world's first Buddhist game," quips **Phil Campbell**, who was then senior designer at Eidos. "Buddhist with guns, I call it."

Set in a totalitarian city ruled by a supercomputer and replete with RoboCop-style satirical ads ("Drink Quanta Cola, the energising drink with radioactive quanta extract"), the game possessed a subversive, cyberpunk edge. Imagine The Fifth Element crossed with Liberty City and a dash of Parisian red-light district Pigalle: among the supermarkets, temples and libraries are strip clubs populated by kabuki-faced pole dancers and sex shops crammed with dildos. The subversive quality seeps into the story too: starting out as a cop interrogating enemies of the state, you eventually join the resistance. One avatar's terrorist is another avatar's freedom fighter.

"There were many new ideas, probably too many," admits Cage. "I wanted to mix different genres but I wouldn't say we were 100 per cent successful." Seesawing between adventure game, RPG, firstperson shooter, 3D fighting game, and the odd bit of driving, *Omikron* was about ten games in one.

It didn't always work, not least the switches between third- and firstperson perspectives for the awkward shooting sequences. "I'm in the 15 per cent of people who can't play games in firstperson because I get sick," Cage explains. "Initially we wanted to have the shooting in thirdperson because firstperson gives me headaches and we didn't think it fit with the style of the game. But *Half-Life* was very successful at the time and Eidos really pushed for firstperson. I think it was a mistake."

Flawed as it might have been, it was flawed genius. Campbell, who'd later leave Eidos to join Quantic Dream as its chief creative officer, was among those who were wowed by Cage's vision. "I went out with him at
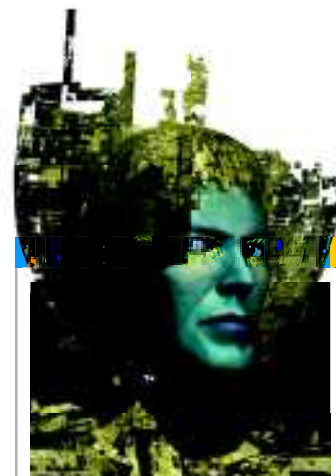
MOOD MUSIC
Opening with the soaring, fragile beauty of its theme song New Angels of Promise, *Omikron*'s soundtrack is a tour de force. Cage himself was stunned by Bowie's contribution. "I was expecting something really strange and unhealthy in the spirit of the graphics," he says, "but he gave us exactly the opposite based on guitar, piano and voice with a lot of melodies. It's something I've learned from him – to use the music not to repeat what's already in the image but to add something to it, expand what it says." For Bowie, staying away from the usual techno-industrial game sound was a deliberate ploy. "We wanted to create an emotional sound," he told Salon.com. "In *Omikron* it's your soul that's at stake – we wanted to make sure that your heart was playing along too."

One of Phil Campbell's memorable early mission designs – for a jewel heist at Lahoreh's – was built around the face of David Cage. Cage liked it enough to offer Campbell a job

"There were many new ideas, probably too many. I wanted to mix genres but I wouldn't say we were 100 per cent successful"

E3 and got him drunk, worming my way onto the project," he recalls. "We invented an alter-ego for David, calling him 'Foggy.' It was primarily intended to start the cult of 'David Cage'!"

Designing the parameters of an open world wasn't easy. A lot of questions came up in development: would players be able to drive the game's taxis – 'sliders' – and use them to ram-raid shops or police mechs? Would they be able to start fist-fights with passers-by? Ultimately, none of those options was pursued and *Omikron*'s open world shipped mayhem-free – to the detriment of its potential profits. "Perhaps *GTA* got it right, at least from a commercial point of view," muses Campbell today.

For Cage, such concerns were trivial. Unlike Rockstar's anarchic mafia sandbox, *Omikron* maintained a rigid sense of itself as an emotional, ambitious epic. The problem was that an open world didn't lend itself to the demands of linear drama.

"It's very difficult to forge a real sense of narrative in an open world," the designer explains. "As a player you want to explore the world and drive around it but it destroys any sense of pace in the story. That was the first lesson from *Omikron*: if I want to tell a good story, I need to give more constraints to master the pace and rhythm of the narrative, otherwise the player can destroy it."

David Bowie didn't play videogames, but he knew a lot about virtual identities. He'd been Ziggy Stardust, The Thin White Duke and, once upon a time, just plain old David Jones. When he saw *Omikron*, he knew he wanted to be part of it.

Sex sells in *Omikron*, its fetishist fashions poised between a Skin Two shoot and The Fifth Element. Strip clubs contain mission critical plot points

Cage believes *Omikron*'s world baffled gamers: "Hardcore, cyberpunk sci-fi is really niche. I learned to start with an easier entry point. That's why *Fahrenheit* is modern-day"

Playing digital being Boz (above) wasn't a stretch for Bowie. "It was about becoming another character," explains Cage. "That's been a theme in his career"

In early development Cage had scribbled down a list of artists he'd love to have compose the game's score. Björk, Massive Attack and fellow trip-hop band Archive were all on the shortlist. So was Bowie.

"We put him on there although no one thought we'd even be able to talk to him," laughs Cage. Instead, Bowie responded immediately to their approach and came to Eidos with his son, Duncan Jones, an avid gamer and the future award-winning director of Moon. Not just content with writing music for the game, Bowie wanted to inhabit the virtual space and offered his services. "I can see now how a game like *Omikron* can jolt you into an altered state – with few of those messy side effects!" he joked in an interview with Playboy. He contributed ten original songs to the game (see 'Mood music').

Bowie also spent a month in Paris, where Quantic Dream filmed him with the help of a French motion-capture studio. He played two parts – the youthful lead singer of The Dreamers, an underground band who held furtive concerts in the city's clubs; and the older Boz, a blue-skinned, digital entity who leads the resistance fighters.

"We wanted to capture Bowie doing his signature moves," recalls Campbell, a paid-up, lifelong member of the singer's fan club. "But he didn't think he really had any signature moves so he gave us his choreographer [Edouard Locke] and we captured him doing 'Bowie' routines." They also captured guitarist and regular Bowie collaborator Reeves Gabrels; the rest of the band members were hand-animated. Cage then spent 30 hours on each concert, filming the mo-capped avatars within the game engine using a virtual camera.

It was the first time a real-life performer had gigged inside a videogame, a decade before *GTAIV*'s comedy clubs. Bowie's dual role also tied into Cage's obsession with schizophrenic identities, something that was only underscored by the game's fluid shifting between avatars. Like *Fahrenheit* and *Heavy Rain*, *Omikron* experimented with the emotional potential of such perspective shifts.

Cage particularly liked the early moment when the player, occupying the body of policeman Kay'l, beds his wife. "The idea of being in the body of a guy and making love to his wife – when she believes you're her husband, even though you're not – was a very strange position to be in. That's exactly the kind of thing that I try to explore in all my games today. How can we put you in the shoes of someone else?"
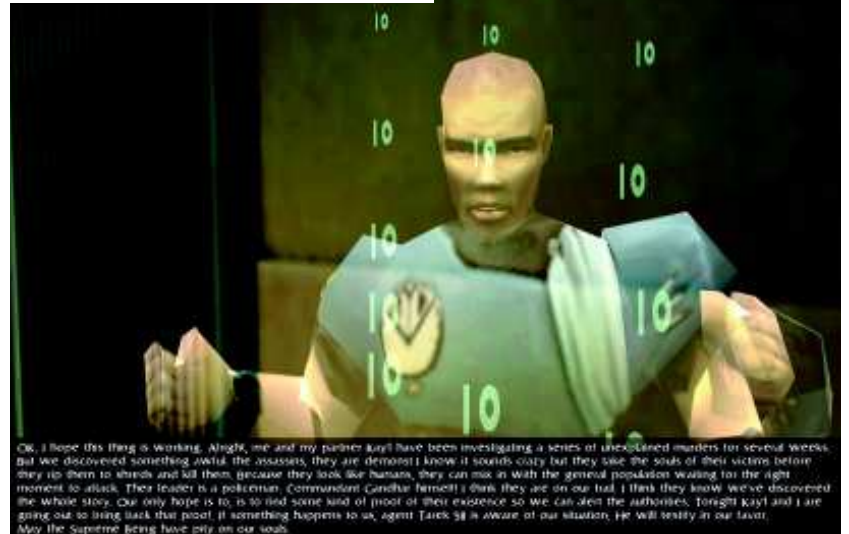
Bowie, a legendary chameleon, totally understood the pleasures of the virtual realm and its Dorian Gray potential. He even roped in his wife Iman, who appears as a bodyguard. "He sometimes joked about leaving his Bowie character in *Omikron* forever," says Campbell. "He would have totally transcended to the digital

side – and 'come out the other side' as just David Jones again."

For a game with such ambition, *Omikron*'s commercial fate was painful. "The titles I create seem to be too weird for the American marketing guys," says Cage. "In the US, Eidos didn't support the game at all, which was really disappointing. The big sales were mainly in Europe, where we sold between 400,000 and 500,000. It was too arty, too French, too 'something' for the American marketing department."

Omikron remains a key game in the evolution of open-world environments. Yet it also marked the arrival of a unique talent. "David Cage really is an auteur in the classic, French, Truffaut style," argues Campbell. "He has such a strong vision that's been there since day one." For his part, the designer believes *Omikron* is the genesis of everything he's done since. "The seeds of *Fahrenheit* and *Heavy Rain* are definitely in there," he says. "They were conceived in reaction to what I discovered making this game. I'm really proud of it but what I learnt making it was what made me decide to choose another way." Like *Omikron*'s nomad soul, Cage's restless creativity remains constant, whatever its host.
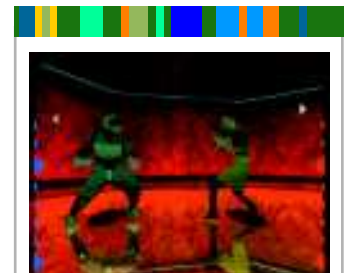
UNDER THE HOOD

So how did Cage's dream become a reality? Sadly lead programmer Fabien Fessard died suddenly in 2005 (aged just 33). "He did a great job driving the new tech that was put together," recalls his colleague Olivier Nallet, who was originally hired to lead the shelved PSX version ("like putting an elephant in a shoebox!") before joining the PC team. "We had to develop custom tools for the specific needs of *Omikron*. The main tool (IAM) was integrated with the 3D engine. It allowed us to associate scripts, triggers in real time, camera, etc. We had a dialogue editor, and we could test full sequences like the FPS and fight sections directly. The tech by itself was relatively rudimentary compared to, say, Unreal. However, we could customise it quickly to what we needed and that's what made it more powerful."