THE MAKING OF...
THE X-FILES

Was HyperBole Studios' The X-Files just another licensed game, or the redemption of the troubled FMV cycle? The truth is out there

FORMAT: **MAC, PC, PS1** PUBLISHER: **FOX INTERACTIVE, ACTIVISION** DEVELOPER: **HYPERBOLE STUDIOS** ORIGIN: **US** RELEASE: **1998**
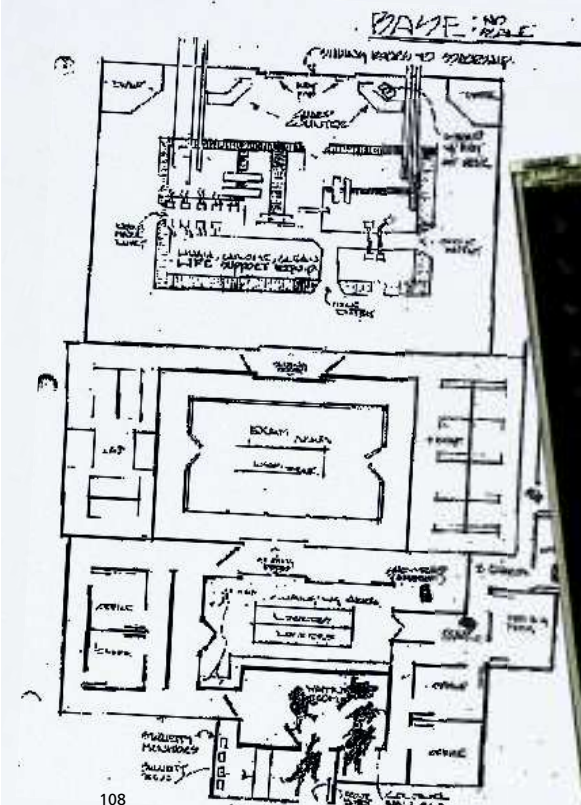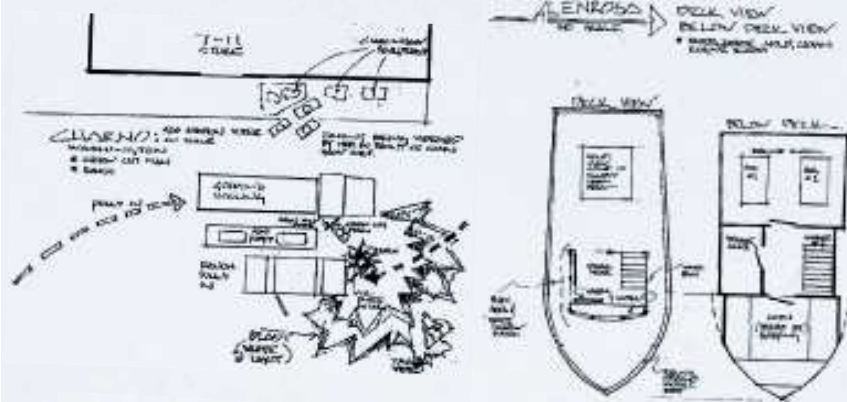
PHOTO VIEWER

ING
MEDIA
PHOTO
E-MAIL
APB
QUIT

Enlargement

Capture   Cancel   Video

Click on a thumbnail for an enlarged image

Paranoia Triggers
None

Paranoia Effects
None

Loss Triggers
Checking mail: Willmore receives a rejection notice from a publisher and several returned short stories

Loss Effects
Content of apartment will be determined by status of loss variable

X Track Triggers
None

Score 0

Score +2

Score

Entrance/Exit Actions & Notes

Character
Elizabeth (answering ma...

View
Initial Acknowledgment
None

Return
None

Loops
None
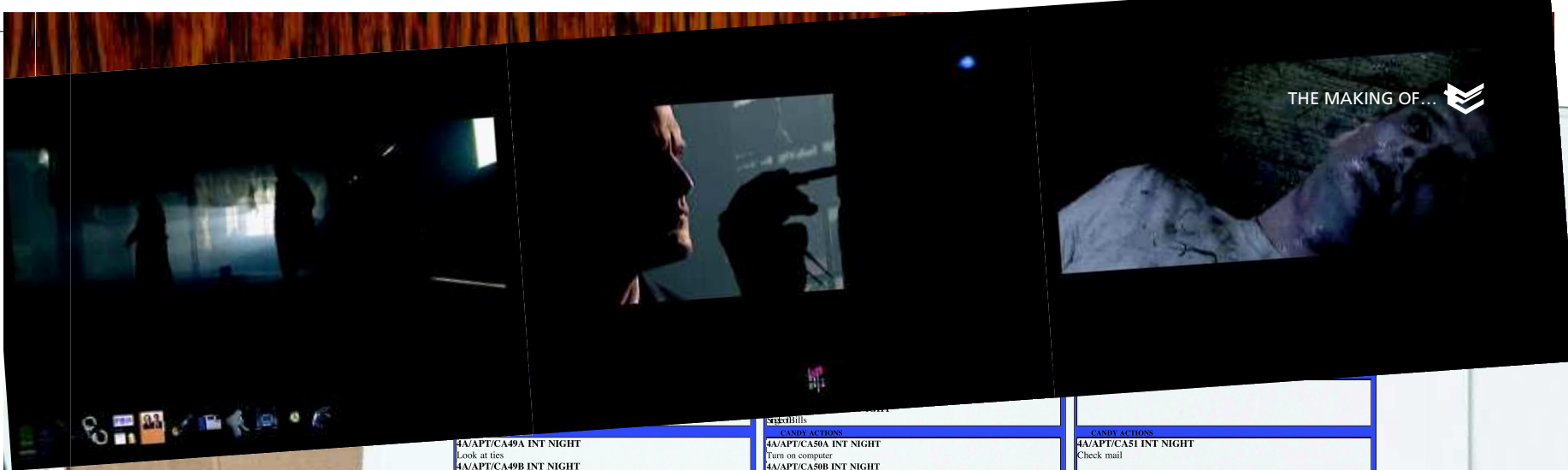
4A/APT/CA49A INT NIGHT
Look at ties
4A/APT/CA49B INT NIGHT
Read journal

CANDY ACTIONS
4A/APT/CA50A INT NIGHT
Turn on computer
4A/APT/CA50B INT NIGHT
Use computer

CANDY ACTIONS
4A/APT/CA51 INT NIGHT
Check mail

Specific sounds
Door
Key
Mailbox
Unpacking
Computer
Phone
Making drink

Music
Selections played on stereo, if appropriate

Environment sounds
Apartment sounds

Intro text
Willmore must match the fingerprint image from the Tarakan against existing databases - revealing that Cook was aboard.

If the player goes home first he will find two messages on his answering machine, one from his ex-wife and one from John Amis at the local crime lab. Amis will inform him that he successfully isolated the fingerprint, but was unable to find a match. He suggests that Willmore run a search on his databases, saying that he has sent the digital image of the print to Willmore's e-mail address. If the player goes to the field office first, he will get the same message from Amis on his voice mail. Either way:

Willmore must retrieve the digital image which Amis has sent to him via e-mail. He must then run a search against all the databases to which he has access. Eventually, it will match with Cook's, but only after Willmore checks against the FBI Agent I.D. Database. This can happen either at home or at the field office.

Chained Dialogue

Actor Jordan Lee Williams stars as player character Special Agent Willmore. Botching his investigation can lead to many different deaths (top right). HyperBole's VirtualCinema game engine required logs of scenes, shots and gameplay elements (left)

Veteran game designer **Greg Roach** muses thoughtfully on the past. "There was a time," he tells us, "when 'interactive movie' wasn't a dirty word." Back in the 1990s, when CD-ROMs were cool and gamers were still being seduced by the siren call of full-motion video clips, Roach was one of the pioneers in his field. Called "the Steven Spielberg of multimedia," the Texan theatre director turned videogame designer believed that games could do something deeper than just "give someone sweaty palms or throw a bunch of silly-assed puzzles at them."

HyperBole had offices in Seattle. In the lobby stood a huge reproduction of Salvador Dali's canvas The Hallucinogenic Toreador. "It was the first thing you saw when you stepped off the elevator," says Roach, "and I'd often ask new hires to meditate on it." With its array of optical tricks, it was a fitting totem. Here was a videogame company that believed full-motion video (FMV) could make art.

But in videogames, much like cinema, art is often mediated by the demands of commerce. Traditionally it's a fight that leaves most creative talents feeling decidedly bruised. When *Quantum Gate*, an avant-garde interactive sci-fi movie, was first released, HyperBole's publisher Media Vision wasn't happy. "They said to us, literally: 'We want more guns and tits in the title'," Roach says.

Convinced that interactive cinema should privilege character and emotion over assault rifles, he despaired. He wanted to make movies you could live inside, worlds that wrapped around players' heads. So when Fox Interactive called looking for someone to make the first X-Files game, he jumped at the chance.

It's 1994 and Roach is sitting in a boardroom at Twentieth Century Fox with Chris Carter, creator of The X-Files. The cult TV show is only in its second series, but it's already snowballing into a phenomenon. FBI agents Mulder and Scully are becoming household names. Viewing figures are rocketing, and Fox Interactive wants a tie-in game.

Once again, not everyone is happy, least of all Carter. "In our first meeting, we sat down with Chris Carter, producer Frank Spotnitz and all the reps from Fox Interactive," Roach remembers. "The first words out of Chris's mouth were 'What can *you* do that I can't?' I thought, how the fuck do I answer this without totally blowing it?" After Roach explained that he wouldn't presume to write an X-Files TV episode, but that he did know how to craft an interactive experience, the atmosphere softened. Carter, intrigued by the potential of FMV, agreed to write a plot outline for the game.

Development took four years and $6m, a significant investment for Fox. What sold the publisher was HyperBole's proprietary VirtualCinema system. "It was primarily a media engine," explains **Jason VandenBerghe**, a programmer on *The X-Files Game*, "a set of scripting tools to let you do point-and-click adventure games, but with full rich media. It's like the Avid editor for games. You didn't have to be a programmer to use it because you could do all the gameplay logic inside the engine, assemble different types of media clips and have them play at different places."

Room
Willmore's office
View

Charno, WA, loc 118560

REC   4/4/96 6:17am
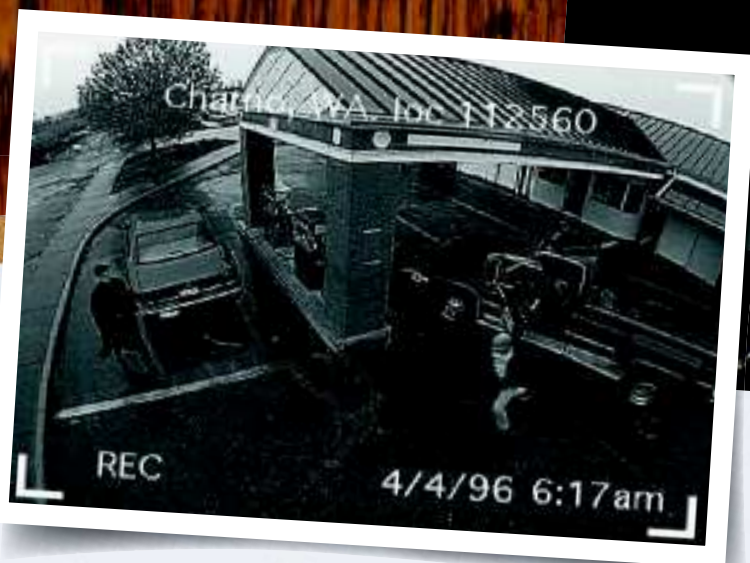
Unlike many FMV games, which often used live action as nothing more than wallpaper backdrops, *The X Files* presented you with a universe to explore. It was a fully fledged world that felt like stepping into one of the TV show's episodes. Playing as FBI Agent Craig Willmore you're tasked with tracking down Mulder and Scully who've vanished, mid-case. Using stitched-together JPEG images, the game lets you explore locations *Myst*-style, but with more human protagonists to interact with.

"If traditional film is a river, the viewer of that film sits on the bank and watches the water flow by," says Roach. "We wanted to take that viewer and turn them into a fish and put them down into that river." A sense of agency

was pivotal. Guiding Willmore through this rich media world, you can interrogate supporting characters and employ equipment from lock picks to a trusty Newton PDA. Find a document with a phone number on it and you can call it. Pull a gun on assistant director Skinner and he'll be spectacularly unimpressed.

"The verbs in games are very, very basic, physical and crude," says Roach. "The agency in most realtime 3D games is expressed in your ability to shoot fucking anything that moves, or blow up a wall. It's a rare title even today where the agency is expressed along the arc of character development, or in verbs that are more focussed on emotional or dramatic actions rather than

FMV title, Roach was allowed to shoot the principal cast himself. Stars David Duchovny and Gillian Anderson were nabbed in between their work on The X-Files movie, although to begin with Fox execs were clearly uncomfortable about letting their talent interact with a non-Hollywood director. When shooting began, and with the budget ticking away at $5-$10K per minute, Fox's top brass showed up on set to cast a suspicious eye over the proceedings. "I remember that first day well," says Roach. "Fuck, it was hardcore."

Such suspicions were endemic. VandenBerghe, who'd later work at EA on very different licensed movie games like *007: Everything Or Nothing* before moving onto Ubisoft's *Red Steel* and *Ghost*

"If traditional film is a river, the viewer sits on the bank and watches the water flow by. We wanted to turn them into a fish"

visceral physical run, jump, shoot forms of expression." The ambition of *The X-Files Game* was to change all that.

In keeping with the fractious relationship between games and Hollywood, production on the title was gruelling. "Working with a company like Fox is a lot like talking to a person with multiple personality disorder or Alzheimer's," laughs the director. "They never remember from one minute to the next what they've agreed to. We had to deal with the legal division, marketing department, Fox Interactive, the TV division and Chris Carter. Each of them has their own fiefdom and their own veto capacity that only extends so far in certain areas." Unusually for a licensed

Recon franchises, reckons it was largely a result of the two industries' different attitudes.

"We don't share the same language," he argues. "Hollywood is a culture of personality where people with strong personalities can convince you they know what the fuck they're talking about even if they don't. The game industry sells systems; it's an engineering culture where you have to know what you're talking about. You can't be a bullshitter. Those two cultures are incompatible with one another, and unless you have someone who can bridge the gap, everything comes to a screeching halt. Greg was a natural bridge. I have never worked with a game developer who has quite such a strong vision or a capacity to communicate it."

I WANT TO BELIEVE

Hidden somewhere on the PC version's seven discs is an Easter egg created by Vandenberghe. "I don't think anyone has ever found it," he says. "We took photos of the entire HyperBole office and constructed it in VirtualCinema. You can walk around the office, go into Greg's room and there's a monster hidden in the bathroom." To crack the code, bring up the PDA's map and type 'The nature of infinity is paradox', without spaces. No one can remember, however, which disc holds the assets (number five, says Vandenberghe, while Roach reckons it's seven). We've tried without success, but we're assured that the truth is out there.

Thanks to the X-Files movie, Gillian Anderson (left) and David Duchovny were available for only five days of shooting. Intrigued by the process, Anderson volunteered to return for a further three days – which is why she dominates the game's finale

Specific sounds	Intro text	
Opening hatches Sliding doors Opening drawers	**Willmore investigates the mysterious deaths aboard the Tarakan.** Willmore and Astadourian look over the rest of the boat. They notice that the cabin has been dusted for fingerprints. Astadourian surmises this was done during the police investigation of the deaths. Willmore looks closer, and discovers something strange — fresh fingerprints on top of the dusted ones. (Growing Food) Willmore must arrange to have these analyzed — either by phone or in person at the crime lab. Willmore must find a drawer in the Captain's quarters that contains what looks like a payroll log. The entries, listing names and figures in column form, are in Cyrillic. Willmore will have to have this document translated in order to discover a clue. Astadourian says there's a task force investigating Russian smuggling in the Seattle area, with a full-time translator at its disposal. She volunteers to take the document there to find out what it says. Willmore can accept her offer or take the log to Amis at the local crime lab for translation.	**3B/TARA/CHAIN 3″** **Chained Dialogue: ASTADOURIAN 3GB1** **WILLMORE:** This looks interesting. **ASTADOURIAN:** Looks like Cyrillic. Seattle PD has a task force investigating a smuggling ring out of the former Soviet Union. They've got a full-time translator assigned over there - I'll get it translated. •**WILLMORE OPTIONS**: 1) Okay. 2) That's fine. I'm assuming you'll share. 3) Do you mind if I have the Bureau handle it? 4) I'll handle the translation.
Music Anticipating, accents on shadows and sphere		IF CHOICE 1 - "Okay": **ASTADOURIAN:** Well, that was easy. I thought you would certainly give me grief about that. **WILLMORE:** No. If Seattle PD has the resources - let's take advantage of them. **ASTADOURIAN:** Well, that's a commendable attitude.
Environment sounds Seagulls Wind (both muted when inside)	They also discover two interesting pieces of evidence. One is an odd storage box which contains a heavy lead sphere. The other is a set of empty crates with distinctive Cyrillic markings on the side. When they're finished searching the Tarakan, MENDOZA, a policeman approaches Astadourian and says that he received a call from the County Coroner's Office. He's completing his autopsy on Wong — and has found something surprising. Depending upon earlier choices Astadourian might ask Willmore if he'd like to come along. If not, Willmore can invite himself or show up at the Coroner's later. Willmore is unable to tell her exactly what he expects that autopsy to reveal that would be of interest to him. She suspects that he knows more about this case than he's sharing with	IF CHOICE 2 - "That's fine. I'm assuming you'll share": **ASTADOURIAN**: Of course I'll share. *(PAUSE)* Well, that was easy. I thought you would certainly give me grief about that. **WILLMORE**: No. If Seattle PD has the resources - let's take advantage of them.

While most FMV games failed because they were B-movies, with cheesy acting and low-budget production values, *The X-Files* was the genre's first true blockbuster – a Hollywood-quality production using the same assets as the show it was based on. Yet despite the budget and access, using digital video to build a game was still an awkward marriage, and several key problems became apparent.

Navigation through the environment's smaller spaces was a pain (as anyone who spent 20 minutes trying to get out of the FBI field office can attest to), and cinematographer John Joffin's decision to match the smoky aesthetic of the TV show caused a number of headaches.

"We called him the smoke Nazi," laughs Roach. "Problem is, when you have a camera three feet from an actor's face rather than 15 feet from a far wall, the smoke's a different proposition. We'd get the stuff back in post-production and we'd be like, 'Fuck, it looks like the building's on fire!'" De-smoking the environments in the game engine became a major enterprise.

But the real sticking point was the interactive drama itself. For all its incredible atmospheric and cinematic power, it still can't overcome the final hurdle of melding interactivity with the passivity demanded by scripted sequences. The fault isn't so much a failure of the designers as the limitations of FMV as a tool.

"Working on *The X-Files* proved to me that interactivity and drama directly oppose each other," VandenBerghe says. "Thus, interactive cinema is limited at best and doomed at worst. That was a devastating realisation. Drama is all about being a helpless witness to events. The moment you give the viewer agency, the emotional spectrum shifts from tension to curiosity. We could never get past that fundamental thing. Curiosity kills tension and you end up with a puzzle game with a rich, detailed background behind it."

Released in the summer of 1998, *The X-Files Game* sold in the region of a million copies. In part success was a case of enviable timing – the movie arrived in cinemas just a month later. But it was also proof of how well received it was among fans of the TV show, many of whom were non-gamers happy to ignore the compromises the immersive atmosphere demanded.

In retrospect, it's possible the entire FMV cycle largely missed its target market – non-gamers who like the familiarity of dealing with live-action scenes rather than hardcore gamers who demanded fast action and deep interactivity.

"I think *The X-Files Game* was the last hurrah for FMV," Roach muses philosophically. "I had a lot of people come to me and say that they felt like the concept had been acquitted by the title; they felt like this one knocked it out of the park and proved these weren't just harebrained ideas."

Certainly the game's feel was infinitely closer to the TV show than Black Ops' thirdperson follow-up *The X-Files: Resist Or Serve*. FMV's key selling point was its immersive photorealism, and *The X-Files* delivered that brilliantly. Today, Roach remains adamant that FMV is more than just a historical curio: "Everything old is new again. In the early '90s there was such a buzz around virtual reality. What's the buzz today? 3D. There's not a lot of difference between 3D, FMV and immersive VR. We're still chasing that idea of being able to truly live in the fantasy…"

Mitch Pileggi (right) reprised his role as gruff but dependable FBI assistant director Walter Skinner. Other guests familiar from the TV show include The Lone Gunmen, who hack Willmore's desktop webcam to offer a few conspiracy theory pointers