

Alpha Protocol
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Questions and Answers

Starters

RPG's are predominantly, if not exclusively, set in traditional science fiction or fantasy universes. What convinced you an RPG presented as a contemporary spy thriller was the way to go with this original material?

Chris: When we started making Alpha Protocol we were pretty much in the throws. We had just finished up KOTOR 2 and Neverwinter Nights 2 and both of those are pretty traditional, very rules based RPG's and we wanted to do something that was more action-based. A little bit more accessible. And so we just looked around and we really liked the espionage genre because nobody had really played in it. We thought it would be really cool to go from a green agent to a powerful, modern-day superhero. And so Alpha Protocol was born out of that.

Alpha Protocol is another game that lets the player shape their character. I imagine this makes the development process an extreme challenge at best. How has the character development process been going? What are the limitations in character development?

Abia: Early on in production we really focused on making this game about playing as Michael Thorton. So some of the customizations we've focused on have been things that Thorton would be able to do. So we didn't really focus on the traditional "make your face" type modifications. Instead, we really focused on how you can modify glasses, beards, hair etc. We tried to stay away from "choose your nose" or any type of plastic surgery type modifications. We tried to keep it based in the real world, what an agent would really do.

How has the experience in developing games like Neverwinter Nights 2 and KOTOR II helped the development team in creating Alpha Protocol? Can we expect to see any similarities from either of those games present in Alpha Protocol?

Chris: Yeah Obsidian has a really long history but the honors all go back to Blackout Studios. So we borrowed stuff from all the Role Playing games that we've made. Role playing games are pretty complicated so we definitely have a lot of systems and asset tracking and a lot of behind-the-scenes stuff that we've learned from. But up in the front, the things that you're really going to see a lot of are the character development aspects

where you have an influence system and how you interact with different characters over the course of the game builds influence with them and that's how they respond to you and feedback to you. We're really on our third or fourth generation of trying to make that incredibly reactive and complex and that would be a great example of something that's really built up from KOTOR II and Neverwinter Nights 2 and even the games we worked on back at Blackout.

Real-world settings without supernatural elements are even less common in RPG's than other game genres, perhaps partially because RPG gameplay tends to be somewhat abstracted in the first place. How are you overcoming that gameplay abstraction, and if you are indeed steering clear of elements like magic, is it difficult not to be able to fall back on them?

Nathan: We originally went for a more realistic version of gameplay and how Michael Thorton interacted with the world. However, we decided that wasn't as exciting as having some sort of superpower type of magical abilities because Michael Thorton is a "super-agent". He's a cut above an ordinary human being. So we have added some abstractions and some things that act like superpowers. For instance, we have an ability called "chain-shot" where you can basically stop time and line up your shot and kill a bunch of guys all at once.

Since Alpha Protocol is set in a game universe more common to FPS titles, was there any consideration for developing Alpha Protocol as a first person RPG, similar to Elder of Scrolls IV: Oblivion, as nod to the plot theme?

Chris: We actually looked at making an FPS for a long time. There's certainly a lot of influence from other FPS games and obviously Oblivion. But we really felt that it was important to see your character because we have a lot of action elements in the game like: jumping, using cover, zip lining, talking to people. And we felt seeing Mike doing those things all the time was really important to feel what he was doing and understanding that interaction in the world. And so ultimately we went with a third person, over-the-shoulder camera.

What does Alpha Protocol mean exactly?

Nathan: Alpha Protocol is what happens when an agent has to break their ties with the government and go rogue. This is basically to protect the government. However, things often go wrong.

Character Building

Will the player be locked in to certain spy roles, or can they play out any given mission as a Bond, Bourne, or Bauer type?

Nathan: We sort of lean away from the 3JB analogy because we wanted to go with more of a classless character build system. Basically we wanted to make it so that your

character can excel in what ever spy fields he wants whether that be sabotage, or killing people with guns, or killing people with your bare hands. The missions are designed to favor specific builds like stealth but you can go ahead and blast your way through any mission you like.

What could you tell us about the lead character in Alpha Protocol (Michael Thorton) that would make us believe he differs from the norm?

Chris: First off, we're a role playing game. It almost goes against the goals of the game to really try to define the character. We want the player to decide what kind of character Mike Thorton really is in every way. From his skills to how he deals with people in the world. So we definitely wanted him to look tough and sexy, we wanted him to look like an international secret agent but the player is really in control of deciding everything else about the character. So we're not really trying to develop him as some sort of great, branded, big-league character.

Dialogue

What is the new dialogue system all about?

Chris: The dialogue system is really an evolution of dialogue systems going way back on games that we have worked with or on. They have always been becoming more personal, the production value has been improving. Basically we're working to improve the system that we used in Neverwinter Nights 2. We have ended up with something that looks very similar in appearance but ours is a little bit different. We call ours the dialogue stance system. And our dialogue takes place in real time it doesn't tend to loop back on itself as much. I think it's a little more cinematic in its presentation because you can pick a stance and simply let it play through and your character will continue to pursue the direction that you've given him. The basic idea of the system is that you are picking between different emotional stances and then your character follows those through. Other characters that you meet up with in the world respond more favorably to certain types of treatment over others. Our goal is to have it be super high production value, easy to use, but keep the same intensity that we are trying to create with the rest of the game.

On dialogue trees and choices, what is to stop the player from saving the game before many (if not all) of the choices in the game, and reloading after seeing what each style of dialogue results with?

Nathan: Right now we don't have anything to stop the player from doing this. However, the results of those different dialogues are not always immediately felt. Often these can be seen in other parts of the game and actually in the end game in particular you'll end up seeing a lot of reactivity to stuff that happened throughout the game.

Was the Bond/Bauer/Bourne model for attitudes in interacting with non player characters just a handy paradigm in development for the three playable

personalities you're granting Michael Thorton, or do you believe they're almost exclusively the three archetypes for "agency operatives" in modern thriller fiction?

Chris: We used it as a paradigm and as Nathan said a little bit ago we're trying to move away from that in our presentation of the game because it was a little too easy for people to latch on to. And our goal is for the player to create whatever type of secret agent they want to make and not feel corralled into one of these existing personalities or play style types. It's more about open choice and making whatever type of modern day action hero you want to make.

Visual Style & Setting

In Alpha Protocol you've admittedly searched inspiration from works like Syriana for gritty and "deep" aspects of the game but on the other hand you've also reached for the opposite of the spectrum with over the top abilities and characters. How are you going to bring these two aspects together?

Abia: To be honest we're going to see how this all works out but the visual style we've focused on is Syriana and we feel like the cinematic effects bring in that cinematic language to our game. And when it comes to our story we have those hard hitting, gritty aspects. I think when you put the two together it definitely elevates the visual language that we're going for with this game. When it comes to our characters we are going for some over the top characters. You've probably seen it in some of the concepts and other things that we've released already. We want to stay away from just guys in suits. It also helps gameplay wise when your bosses show some type of over the top characteristics. So those are the things that we've focused on for our visual style of the game.

Do you think you're running a risk of being mistaken for just another game in the crowded action-shooter genre when you're actually trying something fairly original?

Chris: We think that there is a risk there but I don't think that if we get our message out and actually show what we are doing with gameplay and how we are doing it, I don't think we are running a big risk there. The thing is that the way that we've approached the shooter and RPG aspects is really to blend them together and if people never play the game they might get the idea that it's just another generic shooter but as soon as they actually pick it up and play it and start to see what we've done with the RPG elements and how well the shooter elements work and how all these things play together, they're going to realize that this isn't your ordinary shooter game. It really is something new and really cool. I really hope that it's going to open up the eyes of many FPS people and get them really excited about something that they may have never played before which is a really driven, story based role playing game with these really cool action elements in it.

Because Alpha Protocol is an RPG based in the modern-day world setting, how challenging has it been trying to make the modern-day look "cool" or "exciting" compared to the traditional Sci-Fi / Fantasy settings of other RPG's?

Chris: It's been pretty tough for us you know making fantasy games or making sci-fi games you can kind of make whatever you want and people just buy it as long as it looks cool so you don't have to be as convincing you just have to make stuff that looks really really rockin'. So when we started making a bunch of realistic stuff we quickly realized that making realistic stuff isn't nearly as easy as making fantasy stuff and then when you go really REALLY realistic people think it's kind of boring so we've veered away from that over time. Like Abia was saying, our characters got a little more over the top to kind of spice them up a bit; we definitely embraced some cinematic styles that we saw or referenced from the movies that we thought were cool, and added a lot of emotional content to the areas we were creating. And even some of the special abilities are a bit more flashy than really realistic. We use a lot of full screen effects, post processing, we use a lot of shaders that we've created to make stuff look really sweet. But then just have it rooted in realism so that people will have something to latch on to.

What are some of the more unique or cooler animations you've seen in the game so far?

Abia: Tough question. I just want to say that we have an incredible animation team that has been working really hard on the animations. It's kind of hard to pick which ones are my favorites but I will say that we have some great AI based animations that have gone into the game. Probably the stealth takedowns are some of my favorite animations, hit reactions...I really like watching guys on fire, that's probably one of my favorites I could do that all day but you know I'm demented like that so...*chuckles*. But we've got some really great stuff and I can't wait until we get to show it all off to you guys.

Alpha Protocol seems to use the increasingly popular over-the-shoulder camera, which like Mass Effect adds more of an action flavor. Do you think that the direction is indicative of a trend in Western RPG's, and do you have any other thoughts on the genre's future?

Ryan: Finally, a question I can answer! When we were playing around with Alpha Protocol we found that the over-the-shoulder camera worked the best. You get to see your character especially when he's sneaking around and doing that type of stuff. It feels more like you can get into it. It probably could work first person as well but when you're trying to do cover and looking around it's kind of more cinematic in the respect that you can see stuff coming. It just works for our game. I wouldn't go so far as to say that it's becoming a trend because there are other games that don't do it: Bioshock didn't do it and it has some RPG elements to it. Over the shoulder just seems to work the best for our game. You get to see all the outfits and stuff.

Very few games have attempted what you're going for in Alpha Protocol, but what titles are you drawing inspiration from? Has Deus Ex informed the game's development at all as one of the first games to blend action and RPG elements?

Abia: There have been a lot of games that we've looked at during the development of this game. Deus Ex is definitely something that we looked at as a game that just shows great action RPG gameplay. More recently Mass Effect has kind of laid some great groundwork for a lot of things that we were already thinking about. When that game came out it was nice to see that we were doing some things that were on the right track and we've modified some other things. But it kind of confirmed where we were going. I think very early on we were looking at Resident Evil 4. That was a game that we looked at a lot. Half Life 2 is another one. And we are using the Unreal 3 Engine so a lot of Unreal games were things we were looking at on the technical side. Gears of War was a game that we looked at for a while. And very recently I know that our animation team loves Uncharted. It's just a great, incredible game that we've been looking at as a great example of good, third person action gameplay.

Game Structure

What kinds of mission objectives can we expect? Will there be multiple ways to complete them based on how you raise your character?

Nathan: Every mission has a major objective and generally has a number of smaller objectives for Michael Thorton to accomplish. In most of the larger missions, even smaller missions, there are many different ways to approach or to solve the mission. It mostly depends on how you develop your character and how he can overcome the obstacles in your way. So basically it's up to the player to decide how he wants to get through it.

Do the actions by the player in previous missions affect the world through news or mission set up in the next mission?

Nathan: We wanted to keep all of the missions available regardless of what the player is doing. The actions of the player will affect the news but it will also affect all the different missions across the world. In particular, you'll end up seeing a lot of the little things you did show up in the end game. It will show up in the fact of depending on who you allied with, which factions are friendly with you. They may come in and hinder or help your ability to complete the end mission.

Is there some sort of central hub that allows you to roam around freely, before actually going into a mission?

Chris: We don't actually have a central hub. We considered that but we ultimately decided to limit most of the free roam aspects of the game down to the safe houses because they're really quick to use, you can get all the stuff you need to take care of and get right back into the action. So out in these safe houses you're able to do prep, you are able to contact people, have conversations or whatever else you want to do. So we kept all of the free roam aspects limited to the safe houses and took the more exploration aspects that you apply to a big hub and placed those into the actual missions you are going on rather than using the hub.

How twitch-based is the gunplay combat? Is it similar to, say, Splinter Cell where it's almost FPS, or is it going to be more similar to how Star Wars Galaxies does it, where you click on the target and your stats or skills take over?

Ryan: It is NOT like Star Wars Galaxies. It is very much twitch-based. We wanted to make sure that the player felt like they were involved with the combat as opposed to just their abilities. The abilities in the game basically enhance your shooting ability. Meaning if you have a level ten skill in pistols, you will do more damage with your pistol. So it doesn't help you with your aim necessarily. You just maybe will get critical shots more often. But if you were level zero and you got a critical shot on a guy you could still kill him. We're not changing it so that it won't be fun anymore, but if you can't aim you're not going to hit the side of a barn anyway so we don't have it going for or against you we just have it enhance your skills. So basically it's twitch-based.

Was there an attempt to use the d20 style with this game?

Nathan: We never actually considered using any kind of d20 system. We wanted to preserve the player skill that you would get with a shooter and have the computer actually help you with what Ryan said earlier, determining things like damage and criticals and your skill will actually help how your gun recoils and your reload time and that sort of thing. We really didn't want to penalize the FPS player. If he's really good at taking guys down with very little, let's just let him do that and just help him do it even better.

Combat & Skills

How does Alpha Protocol handle the typical RPG skill system? Can players tweak stats to build out their spy, or is this process streamlined for an FPS audience?

Chris: We created a system that we hope is both simple to understand but at the same time allows a lot of depth in your character building and customization. So there are ten skills that you use to level up your character that we've sort of touched on here and there. These are like gun skills, hacking abilities, how resistant you are to damage, how good you are at picking locks and such. So the average FPS player who might not be familiar with RPG's or might not be into the idea of building out their character can really just pick almost like a class, we call it a background, and that will sort of give them a number of stats and they can auto level up during the game and that will be very straightforward and transparent. However if you are more hardcore, you can go ahead and decide exactly which skills you want to level up and where you want to spend those points and how you really want to build your own character. We're hoping that that balance of not having too many different things to pick between, having them being straight forward, but having a lot of depth to how they work hopefully satisfies all audiences. So far internally people are really excited about it.

Will the combat be in real time or will there be number crunching under the hood?

Nathan: It's definitely in real time. There's a little bit of number crunching, like we said, in terms of like damage inflicted and resisted and so forth. But the RPG genre is all about tactically using your skill. So we definitely employ that in the game but the combat is real time.

Could you give us some insight on the stealth mechanics?

Ryan: The stealth is stuff like obviously staying out of sight of the enemies, cameras and turrets. There is some equipment that you could use to basically lower your audio profile so you can sneak up on guys using stuff like that. Obviously if you start firing off a gun that doesn't have some kind of suppressor you're kind of throwing that stealth element out but you can recover that at one point. Plus you can use some of your other skills like hacking to disable cameras so you can ninja around levels some more. There are no real big tricks to it. You have these abilities that you can use but it is up to the player when and how to use them.

Weapons & Gadgets

Are the weapons fictional or based on real weapons? Does the main character have any special abilities to enhance these weapons, or that can be used outside of these weapons?

Chris: Obviously the weapons in Alpha Protocol are really important to us and they play a big role in the RPG system and they play a big role in combat. You don't have to use them but I think that most people will defer to the shooting portion of the game. They're not based on real world counterparts; they're loosely based on them I mean we certainly got visual reference and tried to understand what modern day weapons are and how they work, but we aren't basing them off of anything specifically. And that all ties into the role playing system; Mike has a skill for each of the four types of shooting weapons. He also has close quarter, hand-to-hand skills that he can use if he wants to and of course he also has gadgets which can be lethal as well. But as you level up with any of these you get better in terms of damage, and you'll get special abilities which we touched on earlier. Whatever you skill up in and whichever you're using, the better you get at it and the easier it is going to be to defeat opponents with those things. The example of "chain-shot" that Nathan brought up earlier which is just a simple special ability that you can use that's on a cool down that is used by the pistol so it's pretty stealthy and you can have a suppressor on your pistol and use it silently and take down a bunch of guys really quickly is just an example of how the player can enhance their weapons over the course of the game.

In typical RPG's, weapons are given stats to increase effectiveness and rarity in the world. Will Alpha Protocol have a stat based system for weapons, or will the player hold the stats that make them more effective?

Ryan: It's kind of both. Basically over the course of the game the player can set some skills for the weapons as well as they can find equipment that will actually increase the

damage of the weapon including modifications, ammunition, different parts of the gun, silencers and that sort of stuff. So it's not really one or the other it's just really a mix of both. You could really suck at one and pick up enough modifications to make up for your lack of skill.

Gadgets. Will they be mostly things that are reasonable for the real world, or will they be more fantastic?

Abia: I'd say that we're definitely making things more realistic. We found that with the James Bond, fantastic type of gadgets, we really love the movies, but most of the time those are used only once. And for us to come up with situations just for a one off, we didn't think that would be that rewarding for the players. Instead, we focused on making more realistic gadgets that have more universal work throughout the game. Typically people who are using gadgets are more trap setters and they'll be taking advantage of whatever the enemies are doing in the environment so we wanted to make sure that with these weapons that was the focus.

Enders

This is a much more multiplatform game than you've made before; KOTOR II was released on Xbox and few months later on PC, but Alpha Protocol is in development for three systems. What impact has this had on design and production?

Chris: As mentioned we are using Unreal Engine 3 and that's a multiplatform engine out of the box. It doesn't make developing a game simple but it does help a lot and does do a lot of the heavy lifting for us on the platform specific stuff. On the design side of things, at least currently, we're planning for all three platforms to have the same feature set and to have the same content. And while we do have to tailor that content in cases of like texture resolutions and things like that, for the most part we can develop as if we were developing for one platform and then bring it to life on all of the other ones. The other thing that we've had to do some of is definitely go through and rewrite shaders and optimize for the different platforms and of course the PC is going to require a lot of work on the interface to make sure that it can support both point and click and using the controller. But for the most part it really just comes down to understanding the different needs of each console and planning for them; and then utilizing the technology that we have to make it as easy as possible for us.

Is there any possibility of downloadable content in the future?

Ryan: I hate that question. We're still working it out with SEGA. We'll have more information in the future it's just that nothing has been decided actually. Sorry.

What is the most obscure Achievement (360)/Trophy (PS3) that is planned for Alpha Protocol at this time?

Chris: I will say that I am a die hard believer that if you finish a single player game on the 360 with normal settings you should get something like 600 achievement points because it irritates me to death when I get like 120 after finishing a 20 hour game on normal because I didn't headshot 250 people through the eye. So that is the goal.

Are you looking forward to a PlayStation 3 Alpha Protocol release opening up a new audience for Obsidian's very well received RPG's for competing platforms?

Chris: I can say that I'm personally really excited about working with the PS3. I didn't actually get to make a game on PS2. My last Sony game was on the PlayStation 1. And you know I'm a huge fan. I love the PlayStation and pretty much everybody here does and we're really excited about getting a game out on that platform. It's an awesome system and so putting an awesome game onto it is exciting for us.

Your previous games are sequels of BioWare's original work. They generally received good formal and informal critical evaluation – truly stellar marks factoring in they're sequels to games originally developed by another studio. Do you think your celebrated work on KOTOR II and Neverwinter Nights 2 will drive interest in Alpha Protocol, or do you think the former titles remain too associated with BioWare to give alpha Protocol a leg up in anticipation and sales?

Chris: We go way back with BioWare. The owners of Obsidian all come from blackout studios. Feargus Urquhart who is our CEO was actually the producer on BioWare's first title Shattered Steel. I personally produced the entire Baldur's Gate series for BioWare at Blackout Studios. And then strangely enough we leave Blackout Studios and they were able to help us get hooked up with our first title which kind of turned the tables around and then we ended up making sequels to their games. So we've got a ton of history and it made sense for us to do those sequels when we started because they trusted us and we understood their tech and we understood the kind of game they were making. So it really has to be out in the court of public opinion as to whether or not people can really separate us from them or think that we are too attached to them. But I think that at this point we're starting to work on our own titles that are really REALLY our own. We made Neverwinter 2 and we made KOTOR II our own and I think we did a really great job with those games. And Alpha Protocol is us really stepping away from that; getting back to our roots and making a really cool different RPG, and in this case a really actiony role playing game.

If you hit with Alpha Protocol, do you think it will stand alone as a unique title in the genre, or open up RPG's to a wider range of themes and plot concepts?

Chris: It's hard to say. When we're making a game we're just trying to make something that's really cool. That's what we're trying to do with Alpha Protocol. I think that there's a lot to be said for the idea that making something different doesn't necessarily mean that you're making something good. So we're not just trying to make something different. We're trying to evolve our genre and trying to make a new, different type of role playing game and we think it's going to be awesome. And so far the stuff that we've

put together, the people internally are super super siked about it. And I think the plot and story are going to be something different for the FPS players that we do pull, like the ability to make decisions and feel really involved in what's going on and have the game play that back as far as reactivity goes. I think it's going to be great and I think this kind of game really is going to be something that people get excited about.

Live QA

Sean (Gamespot): I'm curious about the setting of the game. Is it going to be one large city that it's all set in, or will you be traveling all around the globe to different international locales?

Ryan: You're going all over the world. In fact, almost none of it is in a single location for any length of time. There's a lot of going back to different chunks of the world. There are missions where you have a contact who tells you where to go. For example you could be hanging out in Rome and you have a mission somewhere across the world where they need some help out with some other stuff. But it all comes back to the main story in one way or another. So you're not really in a big city like the latest Grand Theft Auto, you're actually going all over the place.

Luis (Gamezone): I'm curious to know how you plan to suck the players into the story. Because with TV, movies, and even videogames you have this pressure put on just the opening sequence alone. But to continue to keep pumping the player, to have something intriguing, exciting, emotional, or all of that put together. What is it that is going through your minds that can convey how you are going to suck us into the game?

Chris: What ends up happening is that at the beginning of the game there is some sort of tragic events that really aren't related to your character but that sets you on a mission that is directly tied to those events. So we are trying to emotionally involve the player right away by making them realize that the context of their mission is important and it is something that has value to the world and to other people in the world immediately, straight off the bat. And then from that point we sort of turn the world upside down on the player. What ends up happening is you end up being forced to go rogue in order to continue to track down the bad things that have been going on and we think that this sort of stage setup is something that will pull the player in right away and really get them excited about what's going on.

Abia: I'd like to add that this is a really unique opportunity for the player to really have an affect on real world kind of events and basically the player can affect something in the news, potentially in the financial markets just to bring down a real bad corporation or the government if that happens to be the case. So basically it's a chance for the player to affect things that are happening in our world right now.

Nathan (SegaNerds.com): I was wondering how open-ended the missions are. Will it be mostly scripted events? Or will it be more like Hitman where you can approach it however you want?

Chris: The missions are probably somewhere in between there. We have a lot of open ended ways to approach the missions obviously that plays into the role playing aspect of the game. We want the player to be developing their own play style. Could be being stealthy or using hand to hand maneuvers to take out their enemies quietly or getting in and shooting people quietly with the pistol or the going in guns blazing kind of guy, could be the kind of guy who likes using a lot of technology or some kind of stealth with the shotgun by sneaking up on people and then blowing them away. Whatever it is that the player wants to use is their own play style. We are trying to support all of those within our combat setups, in the missions themselves and the various ways to get through the missions. We like to think that it's very open ended because you have a lot of different choices about how you would go about doing something but in the end you're doing something similar and accomplishing similar goals as any other player would in the same missions.

Nick (game informer online): Can you guys talk a little bit about the foes that Thorton is going to face along the way and how he is going to interact with the various villains of the game?

Abia: We can talk very generally about it but we're not going to give up any of our storyline or anything like that but what I will say is that our villains have a lot of character and the way you interact with the characters through our dialogue system or through their alliances that you may or may not know affect definitely how you later approach them. We really tried to make this game where depending on what loyalties you've aligned with, on decisions that you've made in other areas of the world affect what's going to happen to other people, other factions, and people close to you or your foes.