THE MAKING OF X-MEN LEGENDS™

BEFORE AN ULTIMATE ALLIANCE WAS FORMED AND PRIOR TO THE MCU'S INCEPTION, RAVEN SOFTWARE FORGED AHEAD WITH ITS OWN AMBITIOUS TAKE ON SUPERHEROES IN THE FORM OF X-MEN LEGENDS. MERGING MARVEL CHARACTERS WITH RPG MECHANICS? THE CREATORS TELL US HOW IT WAS DONE

WORDS BY AARON POTTER

The early Noughties marked a great time to be a Marvel comics fan. Sam Raimi's *Spider-Man* films were beginning to hit their stride, *Secret War* by Brian Michael Bendis was a major crossover storyline at the time, and the widely praised Nineties *X-Men* cartoon had continued to inspire a wide array of successful superhero shows going well into the next decade. Such impressive feats didn't go unnoticed by the videogame world, being enough to encourage many high-profile publishers to find new ways of translating everyone's favourite spandex-laden characters from page to screen. Superhero games had existed for years before, sure, yet it wouldn't be until September of 2004 that console players received their first taste of what one with role-playing mechanics mixed in could look like.

'*Final Fantasy* with X-Men' may have seemed like a daft concept to be floating around the Activision offices circa 2003, but it was exactly this idea that led the team at Raven Software to begin development on the now much-beloved action RPG, *X-Men Legends*. Previously a studio most known for its work on cult classic PC hits like *ShadowCaster*, *Hexen* and *NecroDome*, Raven soon found itself in a position where it was aching to break into the home console space. What better way to cement its dominance here than with a game based on one of comics' most popular super teams?

Marvel's *X-Men* was the perfect choice for a game based so heavily around team mechanics and swappable party members. And luckily for Activision and Raven Software, project lead Patrick Lipo had grown up quite the comic book aficionado. "I was pretty well-versed," he says with regards to all things superheroes. "During college in the early Nineties I happened to live only a few blocks from one of the best comics stores in the Midwest. During that time, two properties were absolutely everywhere: *Batman* and *X-Men*. Between mini-series and spin-offs it wasn't uncommon to see a half-dozen series of each selling in a given month… and I bought them all – even the goofy variant covers and the really terrible stuff." Patrick admits that he tended to gravitate more towards "norms" like Batman and "plain clothes heroes" like John Constantine. Those ragtag bunch of mutants, though, were a special exception. "For whatever reason *X-Men* became the super-powered stories I went all in on. It was an intoxicating time to be into comics because they were really breaking into popular consciousness."

Such a knowledge and appreciation for the source material placed Patrick in a good position to lead the way for a different style of superhero game based on the X-Men. The original plan, as already alluded to, was to have the action be turn-based, but it quickly became clear that only a more action-orientated combat system would do classic heroes like Wolverine, Cyclops and Colossus justice. This faster pace would also let the studio creatives play to their strengths.

IN THE KNOW

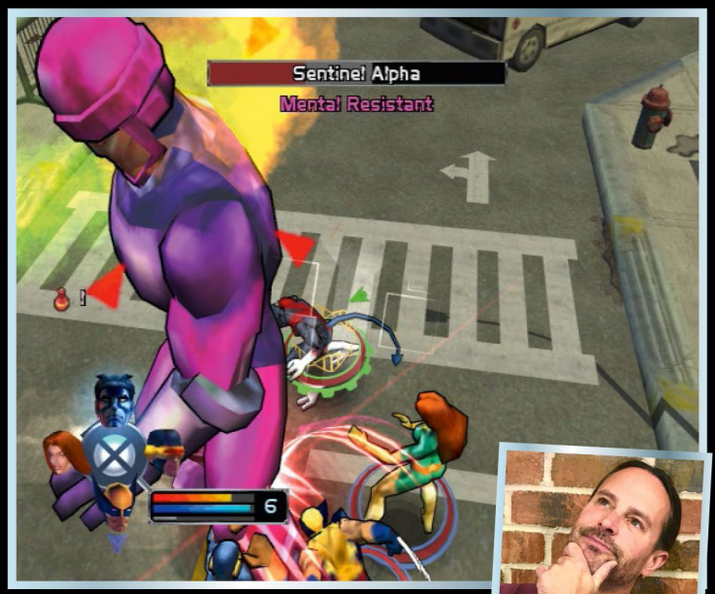
- **PUBLISHER:** ACTIVISION
- **DEVELOPER:** RAVEN SOFTWARE
- **RELEASED:** 2004
- **PLATFORM:** GAMECUBE, PLAYSTATION 2, XBOX
- **GENRE:** ACTION RPG

DEVELOPER HIGHLIGHTS

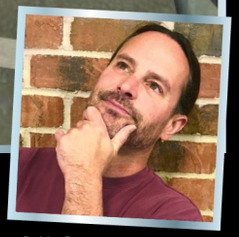
HERETIC
SYSTEM: PC, MAC
YEAR: 1994

MAGESLAYER
SYSTEM: PC
YEAR: 1997

SOLDIER OF FORTUNE (PICTURED)
SYSTEM: PC, VARIOUS
YEAR: 2000



» [GameCube] Raven took enemy variety very seriously. The best example is the New York flashback mission where you face sentinels.



» Bobby Duncanson was a mocap supervisor on *X-Men Legends*.

» Project lead Patrick Lipo was a big fan of comic books.

» Tom Odell was lead designer and faced numerous challenges.

» [GameCube] Swapping out members of your X-Men squad is as easy as finding an extraction point and choosing the desired replacement.

» [GameCube] You're able to unlock new superpowers and stat boosts for each hero the more they level up.

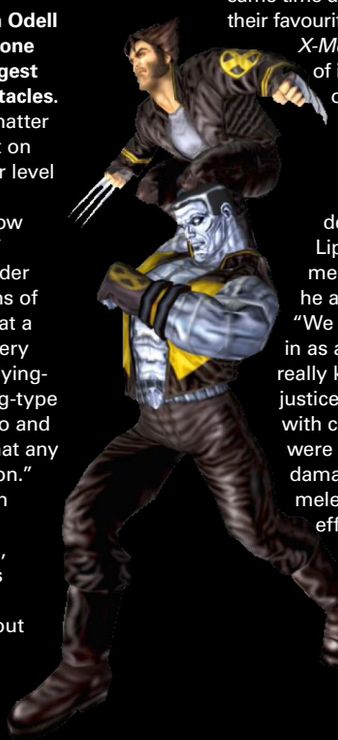
» [GameCube] From underground sewers to Alaskan satellite bases, environments in *X-Men Legends* offer a lot of variety.

This sudden realisation meant that Raven Software had a much bigger problem to solve. Namely, how do you create a superhero game with so many different power sets and keep everything balanced? It also didn't help that *X-Men Legends* was intended for a simultaneous multiplatform release across PlayStation 2, GameCube and Xbox, and a locked deadline was looming. The key to solving this came in designing levels that were open enough to accept all the diverse gameplay styles. Players could bring in any four-player squad of X-Men they wanted (out of a possible 15), after all, so it was important to accommodate any potential grouping.

Lead designer Tom Odell recalls this being one of the game's biggest development obstacles. "Just making sure that no matter which heroes the player put on their team or what character level and skills they had, [that] it would not break the level flow or progress of the mission," he posits. "We had to consider all the possible combinations of heroes and their powers, that a player could be using on every mission. Whether it was a flying-type hero, a powerful/strong-type hero, a teleporting-type hero and so on. We had to assume that any hero could be on any mission."

Being an IP that had been around in some shape or form since the early Sixties, various different characters had taken up the coveted mantle of 'X-Man' throughout the decades. True, it may have started out with a quaint line-up of just five involving Beast, Cyclops, Angel, Jean Grey and Iceman, but Raven Software felt pressure to live up to the '*Legends*' moniker it had laid out for itself. As such, the studio was careful to ensure its playable roster consisted of fan-favourite heroes that console audiences would easily recognise, as well as those with powers that lent themselves well to gameplay.

"We definitely took into consideration the popularity of the character and their abilities," Tom elaborates. "We wanted the player to be able to switch up and use different heroes on their team for the different missions, but at the same time also give them the ability to play as their favourite hero whenever they wanted to."



X-Men Legends did this by having all 15 of its playable characters fall into one of three unique fighting types, which could then also be used as a basis to inform their combat style, basic movement and starting stats.

Did any X-Man get cut during development? Project lead Patrick Lipo says no, though there's one member in particular he's disappointed he and the team couldn't quite crack. "We would have loved to put Kitty Pryde in as a playable character, but we didn't really know how we would do her abilities justice," he reveals. "In the end we started with core archetypes … some powers were pretty similar under the hood – damaging projectiles, radial blasts, fancy melee attacks – with their own special effects and animations."

X-Men Legends permitted players the fantasy of battling through stages however and with whomever they wanted. ▶

THE LEGEND CONTINUES

GAMES THAT BUILT UPON RAVEN'S FIRST ISOMETRIC EFFORT

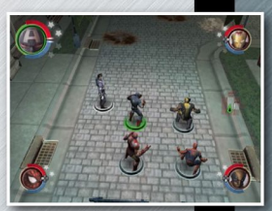
X-MEN LEGENDS 2

Rise Of The Apocalypse retained all the best hallmarks of the first *X-Men Legends*, expanding upon them with a larger superhero roster that included members of Magneto's Brotherhood of Mutants as well as the main X-Men team. Watching these sides work together only reinforced the sequel's co-operative central hook.

MARVEL ULTIMATE ALLIANCE

Raven Software forwent a third game in favour of a spin-off series that would encompass the whole Marvel universe. The cel-shaded look was ditched in favour of a more realistic aesthetic, but the addition of characters like Black Panther, Doctor Doom and Silver Surfer made for some interesting power combinations.

MARVEL ULTIMATE ALLIANCE 2



The first legacy title to not be developed by Raven, *Marvel Ultimate Alliance 2* was heavily inspired by Mark Millar's *Civil War* story arc from the comics. This forced players to side with either Iron Man or Captain America early on, adding extra weight to levels by locking off certain superheroes

MARVEL ULTIMATE ALLIANCE 3

Team Ninja's take on *Ultimate Alliance* returned the series to its classic comic book roots, delivering an appropriately campy adventure that perfectly suited the Nintendo Switch's co-operative tendencies. Passive buffs and stat improvements are more important than ever, though, as you equip your party of superheroes with collectible ISO-8 crystals.

N-GAGING X-MEN

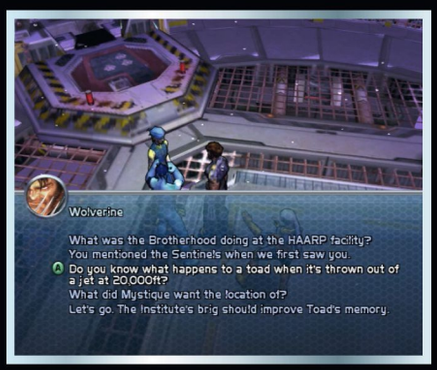
HOW DID LEGENDS STACK UP ON NOKIA'S HANDHELD?

X-Men Legends was such a popular hit on consoles it eventually received a Nokia N-Gage version just five months later. This 'demake' of sorts (and its sequel) was developed by Texas-based studio Barking Lizards, who specialised in making licensed videogames specifically for phone and handheld devices. Purists can rest easy knowing it retains all the basic gameplay elements introduced by its big brother, including the ability to swap between multiple mutants on command, fully destructible environments and in-depth stat upgrades. The N-Gage version even manages to look somewhat like its console counterpart thanks to some beautiful pixel art, which helps keep each of the characters identifiable – even if they lack the same amount of detail.

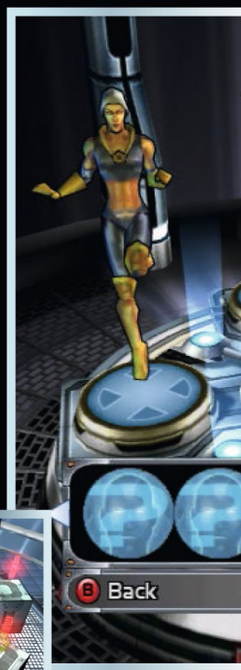
Most of the console iteration's levels are faithfully recreated here, too, as is the story. It was a bold move to try and compress *X-Men Legends*' various pre-rendered cutscenes down to such a small screen, but Barking Lizards just about got it working as long as you don't mind some muffled audio. Where the N-Gage translation does fall down a little, however, is in its combat. While each mutant hero still has a catalogue of special skills they can equip and deploy when enough focus energy is built up, the number of basic attacks is reduced from two to just one. Unfortunately, this results in enemy bouts becoming a bit button mashy.

An odd choice is in how music only accompanies you whenever you enter fights. As such, most of the time it's just you and three other squad members roaming warehouses, city streets and of course the X-Mansion in absolute silence. *X-Men Legends* for N-Gage stacks up well against the game that inspired it overall though despite this, even if *Reign Of Apocalypse* on the Game Boy Advance remains the superior portable take on the X-Men.

» [GameCube] Having two characters perform a special attack simultaneously will engage a combo move, inspired by Colossus and Wolverine's 'Fastball Special'.



» [GameCube] *Legends* was mainly inspired by the comic books, but Raven also winks to Fox's movie series with the odd line.



» [GameCube] Alison acts as the conduit character for players, coming to terms with her fire-based powers shortly after the bombastic opening.

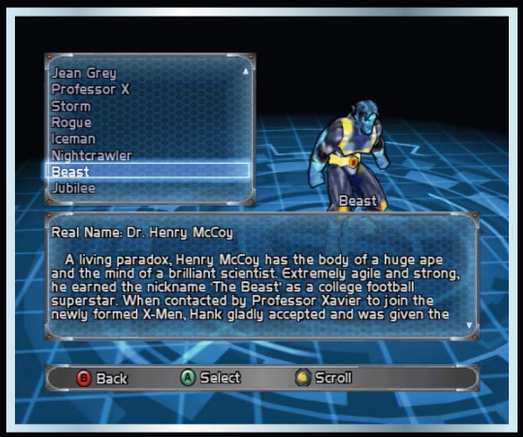
▶ And while the game may start out simply enough with just the relatively melee-focussed Wolverine at your disposal, it isn't at all long until the frost-skating Iceman, teleporting Nightcrawler and more all join the roster. As well as making the levels as free form as possible so as to accommodate each hero's powers, Patrick cites another environmental factor as being crucial to nail, if Raven was to really sell people on this being the best *X-Men* game yet.

"The main thing that I wanted to push more than anything was environment destructibility," Patrick reveals. "My specific target experience, the one thing that I wanted to see as early in the project as possible was to be able to knock someone through a wall, have them continue flying backward, smack into a second wall and then slump to the ground." It was a vision Raven came to realise via the game's grab system, which meant that heroes could lift almost any object or enemy (relative to their strength level), thrown them in any direction, and watch the chaotic demolition ensue. It was yet another way to demonstrate the X-Men's immense power, in addition to each individual hero's unique abilities and combo manoeuvres. "The first time we got that working I ran around cheering."

By the time Raven Software had settled on having the game depict real-time action, almost in the style of a hack-and-slash, *X-Men Legends* ended up resembling something more like *Baldur's Gate: Dark Alliance* or *Diablo*, rather than *Final Fantasy* as the initial pitch had visualised. It just so happened that the top-down, isometric view did a terrific job of keeping all four active X-Men on the screen at all times, truly adding to the scale of this bombastic original storyline penned by Raven's Robert Love alongside a team of former Marvel writers exclusively for the game.

The plot in *X-Men Legends* is appropriately epic, centring on a young new student Alison Crestmere (code name Magma) who has just started developing her mutant powers. Through

» [GameCube] Swapping out members of your X-Men squad is as easy as finding an extraction point and choosing the desired replacement.



» [GameCube] You can visit the X-Mansion in between story missions to read character bios, view cinematics and even play an *X-Men* trivia game.

» [GameCube] Sometimes a specific hero's power is key to moving forward. Where would the team be without a good old ice bridge?

» [GameCube] Just like your team members, bosses can unleash superpowered manoeuvres. Toad's tongue lash will knock everybody back.

» [GameCube] Despite the camera staying far away, plenty of the X-Men's iconic looks are recreated. Jubilee's jacket is gloriously yellow.

» [GameCube] All of the game's pre-rendered cinematics were completed in just four months. Most appear during crucial story moments.

» [GameCube] Flashback missions take place out of the main *Legends* storyline and sees the X-Men don their iconic Seventies costumes.

her players get to enjoy multiple globe-trotting missions, using a flexible squad of X-Men while attempting to thwart the efforts of Magneto's villainous Dark Brotherhood. Patrick reveals the narrative would have also involved an apocalyptic fourth act where an asteroid would hit New York had time permitted. In this scenario, the X-Men were forced to travel through time and fight against enhanced villains who styled themselves after Greek gods. "Cutting that content hurt us deeply," he admits, "but a few alternate costumes from that story made it in – some 'survival' outfits for characters like Cyclops and Storm."

It wasn't lost on Raven just how popular superhero movies were becoming as development on *X-Men Legends* entered full swing. Bryan Singer's 2000 *X-Men* movie was a critical and commercial hit, of course, and though this was a game that largely took inspiration from the comic books – and more specifically Mark Millar's *Ultimate X-Men*, to be exact – it didn't stop Patrick and his team from sprinkling in a bit of Hollywood cache by getting Patrick Stewart himself to reprise the role of Professor Xavier and adopting an early form of motion capture for the in-game cutscenes.

X-Men Legends may have felt like a premium product by the time it hit store shelves thanks to these inclusions, but mocap supervisor Bobby Duncanson recalls that it wasn't always a guarantee. "The cutscenes from start to finish were done in three months with the help of Jarrod Showers [animator] and a couple of interns from our local Madison College," he explains. "Crazy times it was!" Character movements and conversation sequences were captured in such a short space of time, in fact, Bobby was eventually able to "memorise the dialogue of each scene because I heard it over and over again".

Tight timelines aside, all these different elements working in tandem is what caused *X-Men Legends* to chime so vigorously within players' hearts. Activision saw promise in Raven Software's experimentation, however, using this template as a basis for not just a sequel, but a whole other franchise involving the entire Marvel universe. It's a simple fact that without *X-Men Legends* there would be no *Marvel Ultimate Alliance*. Such a legacy makes sense considering the time, love and attention Raven Software put into this initial foundation.

With *X-Men Legends* Raven Software demonstrated a real affection for this universe like few other game developers rarely had. From the X-Mansion that you could fully explore between missions, a bevvy of hidden collectibles and unlockable costumes, to the suite of different abilities unique to each party member, this was the type of *X-Men* game long-time fans had been hoping for and Marvel's family of mutants deserved. As Tom Odell sums up, "We were designing and developing a type of game that was different than anything we had done before and were having a great time doing it." Legendary indeed. ✱