

STUDIO PROFILE

# INKLE

The 80 Days developer on  
burnout and reinvention

By **SAMUEL HORTI**



Around a table in Scott's All Day café near Cambridge station, staff from *80 Days* developer Inkle are arguing about Mercury's orbit. One of them thinks the planet's elliptical path means Venus is, believe it or not, sometimes closer to our sun. The others disagree. "I'll Google it," the dissenter says. "Or", chimes their colleague with a grin, "you could go back to primary school." Everybody chuckles.

Ten seconds later the joke is forgotten and they're back at work: four developers at four laptops working on four different games. Art and code director **Joseph Humfrey** – chunky headphones over his ears – is building a prototype for a rhythm-action platformer inspired by hikes in the Scottish Highlands. Narrative director **Jon Ingold** is tinkering with a Treasure Island "conman game". Senior artist Laura Dilloway's focus is the *Heaven's Vault* Switch port, while designer **Tom Kail** is adjusting the camera for *Pendragon*, an Arthurian, grid-based strategy game that was a secret until today, and will probably be Inkle's next release.

It's at moments like this – a small team teasing each other and trying to decide where they'll go for lunch – that some of the UK's best narrative games come to life. The team has no office: Ingold comes to this café every day, usually sitting at the same table by the window. Members of the team flit in and out, and can largely choose their hours, taking the morning off and instead working at night if they want. "I'm like an old man," Ingold says, "and you all come to visit me."

This laissez-faire approach extends to the team's record keeping. Other than its art, Inkle documents almost nothing. Design ideas, narrative beats and coding architecture are instead kept in their heads, Ingold says. "I don't think that's bitten us on the arse at any point. Every time we do anything, we re-evaluate it from scratch. Every time I'm writing a bit of narrative and I can't remember what the plot was supposed to be, I read what I've got and make it up again. The good stuff lingers, the bad stuff gets thrown away."

**Decisions are taken** quickly between sips of coffee. Still on their first cup of the day, Ingold, Humfrey and Kail thrash out a plan for the final boss of *Pendragon* within the space of two minutes, ending up with an extra stage to the fight. "It will change [again]," says Ingold. "In a month's time I'll say: 'Here's what we're going



**Inkle's five employees work remotely, but the team was eight-strong while making the demanding *Heaven's Vault***

to do'... In a small studio we can iterate like hell. The version of *80 Days* we shipped was the seventh or eighth version."

Their setup used to be even more relaxed, but having children changed that. "I can't remember my life before kids," says Ingold. "You had more energy," replies Humfrey – "and more hair", Ingold shoots back. Humfrey now lives with his family in Leicester, commuting into Cambridge once a month, which "doesn't feel like enough... Before we had children we'd go to the pub and

**"IF YOU REALLY CARE ABOUT SOMETHING, YOU'RE PUTTING A LOT OF YOURSELF INTO IT. IT'S A PART OF YOURSELF"**

we'd just chat about game design," he says. "Now it's much more difficult."

*Heaven's Vault* transformed the way Inkle operated. The studio's most ambitious game to date, it needed years of near-undivided attention. The team, then eight strong instead of the current five, had an office throughout. It was their first project without existing source material: alongside *80 Days* they'd made a game based on Steve Jackson's *Sorcery* books and an interactive version of *Frankenstein*. They poured their souls into creating a new world, with its own history, cultures and architectural styles.

It "burnt all of us out completely", Ingold admits. For Humfrey, letting something so personal out into the wild was "draining", and it was difficult not to take criticism to heart. "If you really care about something, you're putting a lot of yourself into it. It's part of yourself," he says.

After it shipped they needed a break – or at least something less demanding. Kail ported *80 Days* to the Switch. Ingold wrote for Steve Studios' debut game *Over The Alps*, an Apple

# inkle

**Founded** 2001

**Employees** Five

**Key staff** Jon Ingold (co-founder, narrative director), Joseph Humfrey (co-founder, art and code director)

**URL** [Inklestudios.com](http://Inklestudios.com)

**Selected softography** *80 Days*, *Heaven's Vault*, *Sorcery*

**Current projects** *Pendragon*, *Highland Run*

Arcade exclusive. They all devised smaller projects based on ideas new and old, and currently have five prototypes in various stages of polish. *Pendragon*, which Ingold is managing, is furthest down the road.

It was spawned from a digital board game Kail built in his spare time – a merging of chess and *Splatoon*. Players moved counters around a board, "painting" coloured tiles behind them, allowing their other counters to move faster. It was a hobby horse, but Ingold and Humfrey saddled up. "We made a Faustian pact," Ingold reminds Kail, "where I wrote you an AI so that you could actually play the game against the computer, in return for the deal that I was allowed to write a narrative for it. And you foolishly agreed."

The simple counter game morphed into an Arthurian legend that starts as the Knights Of The Round Table disband. King Arthur sets out to defeat his villainous son Mordred, and it's the player's job to support him, winning battles on a procedurally generated map, and unlocking other knights to push around the board. As *Pendragon's* scope grew, the team added new systems, as Kail explains: "We had this ruleset that we were really solid with from three years of lunchtime tinkering. The more I played it, the better I got – and the more I got bored of it." Now, players flip between a diagonal moving mode where they can't take enemy pieces, and an 'attack' stance that can only move up, down, left or right.

Some powerful enemies have special skills – they'll automatically paint the squares around them to make it harder to move nearby, for example – and new characters bring their own abilities. Merlin can teleport, but to unlock him you'll need to find his hiding spot. "He's so lost I haven't actually tested it yet, because I haven't been able to find him," Ingold says. ▶

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The informal coffee shop base lends itself to quick decision making – and ensures no-one need ever go short of a caffeine boost – but the team says their choices are re-assessed several times and often change drastically before they're finalised

Inkle is known for its stories, but *Pendragon* has no set narrative. Aside from a few lines of flavour text at the start and end of battles, it's a self-narrating game "built entirely out of dialogue barks", Ingold says. Characters' moves – aggressive or passive – dictate their words. The way the characters react to the action, and the relationships they form with each other, is the story, and the game works out which dialogue bark fits each situation best.

When you unlock new characters you can play as them during your next run, too. "If you unlock Morgan le Fay, who's an evil character, you can play as an evil person the entire way through," Ingold says. "She's mean and nasty to everybody, and that rewrites the dialogue. If you play as Guinevere and meet Lancelot, they can have a relationship. The idea is you can just explore the possibility space."

Ingold is still searching for a way to tie the ideas together: the kind of "fundamental moment" that Inkle had late in the development of *80 Days*, when it distinguished city exploration by day from overnight stays. "We finally understood what the game was: it was a game about a clock that was running, and you were doing things in realtime, and of course we had to have different content at nighttime and the daytime. But we only discovered that by getting it wrong."

As Ingold solves that puzzle, Humfrey is working out how to match platforming to ceilidh music. In *Highland Run*, players explore the landscape in search of bothies – simple, free shelters that travellers can stay in overnight. The music builds as you gain momentum, and eventually your jumps match the ebb and flow of the music. "The structure of the music is dictating the structure of the platforming," he explains, showing off a very early build.

On screen, his character hurdles rocks, splashes through puddles and clammers up hills in

2D. Once it feels tight, the team will layer in the narrative, as well as survival elements, inspired by the subtle danger of the Highlands. Humfrey, who grew up in Scotland, knows that danger all too well. "[Once], we had to get rescued by a deer stalker," he says. "He drove us over the hills and dropped us off on top of another mountain that was close to the start point. It was dark and we basically had to, in the pitch black, come back down the mountain, vaguely retracing our footsteps to get back to the car. I'm hoping the game will convey that mixture of beauty that the Highlands has, and this layer of danger."

While Inkle is currently prioritising smaller games, Ingold won't rule out staffing up for future

*Vault* with a team of 200 people, unless you have money to set fire to."

Ingold and Humfrey want to continue against the grain, and not bow to the "monoculture" they see emerging in games and beyond. That culture – where players only have time for one indie game at a time, and everybody consumes the same media – scares Ingold. "It's terrifying existentially. I have children, I don't want them to grow up thinking the cinema is where you go to watch a Marvel movie." Humfrey is more relaxed, pointing to the pages and pages of games on Steam selling more than 100,000 copies. "I don't really understand who these developers are exactly because they're not in our

## "YOU JUST DON'T BOTHER TRYING TO MAKE AN [EXPERIMENTAL] GAME LIKE HEAVEN'S VAULT WITH A TEAM OF 200"

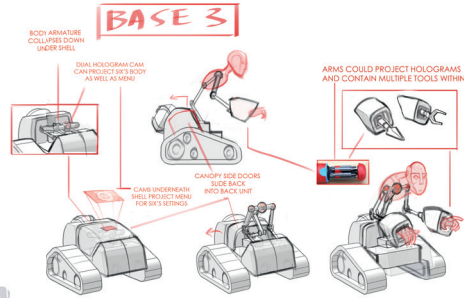
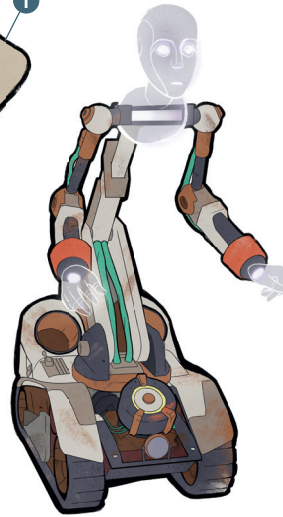
projects. It all depends on where their ideas take them. "If we were making a game where you needed an art crew of 100 people, and I believed in that game, I'd be happy to run that studio, and we'd find a structure that worked" – although the design team would have to remain small. "If we had a writers' room, I wouldn't want 25 writers. I'd only want three."

But he also stresses his desire to take risks – something that's easier when a company is smaller and more adaptable. "The bigger you get, the more restricted you are," he says. "Once you have lots of layers of people to go through to make changes, everything is slower and more expensive, and that means you have to be much safer with the decisions you take commercially. You just don't bother trying to make an [experimental] game like *Heaven's*

bubble, but they are on Steam, and they're making a lot of money."

Currently, Humfrey says, the volume of Inkle's work, including ports, keeps it afloat. But Ingold says his co-founder is underselling the studio: its "killer feature" is that its games don't age. "*80 Days* is a six-year-old game but there's absolutely nothing wrong with it. You try to sell a six-year-old PlayStation game, you'd sell zero."

That timelessness is part of Inkle's identity – an identity the founders want to constantly reinvent. They both agree that the reason they create games is not to make money, but to surprise players, as they did with *80 Days*, and later with *Heaven's Vault*. Continuing to usurp expectations is the team's priority. A Scottish Highlands rhythm-action-survival game and an Arthurian mash-up of *Splatoon* and chess certainly fit the bill. ■



1 Aliya Elasra, the star of *Heaven's Vault*, was partly inspired by Dr Monica Hanna, an Egyptian archaeologist leading attempts to protect the antiquities of her country.

2 *80 Days'* script, which is full of smaller stories spread across 170 cities, contains more than 500,000 words.

3 The first entry in the long-running *Sorcery!* series was fairly faithful to the books, but Inkle's writers, encouraged by fan feedback, gradually added more of their own material

