

Retro tech

BIG BOX GAMES

Before we downloaded PC games, they came in boxes. Big ones. **Rick Lane** unboxes the history of PC gaming's iconic packaging



If you walked into a shop that sells video games today, you'd be forgiven for thinking that PC gaming didn't exist. In 2021, less than one per cent of global PC gaming revenue stemmed from sales of physical copies. Nearly all PC games were sold on digital distribution services or funded themselves through free-to-play models. Nowadays, the closest you can get to a physical PC game purchase is to buy a gift card for Steam or the Epic Store.

Go back 25 years, however, and the situation couldn't be more different. Not only would you find PC games in shops, but they would also dominate the shelves, because of the gigantic cardboard boxes in which they were packaged.

These so-called 'big boxes' were the face of the hobby throughout the 1980s, 1990s and early 2000s – the first thing you saw when you bought the latest Quake or Command & Conquer game. And although they had vanished from shelves completely by 2005, big boxes remain an iconic aspect of PC gaming.

'I've spent way too many hours in stores buying big box games,' says Benjamin Wimmer, a PC game enthusiast who has been collecting big boxes since the 1980s. With 691 classic

PC games in his collection, Wimmer intimately understands the unique appeal of big boxes. 'Most of the time, the money was well spent even if the game wasn't that good, because you'd get a printed manual with additional lore, and trinkets such as maps or coins,' he says. 'Those boxes were like a physical link to whatever fantastic world you'd decided to visit for the next hour or two.'

PC game big boxes are unique artefacts. Yet despite covering walls of shelves in countless shops for over a decade, much about their history is uncertain. The origins of the big box are unclear, and because the games themselves were always the centre of attention, there's little information about the process behind the design of big boxes. That's why we're going to lift the lid on the history of the big box, and browse the manual to find out how they were designed and how they vanished entirely within only a couple of years.

UNPACKING THE PAST

Before we can dive into the origin of the big box, it's important to understand what we mean by the term. The typical dimensions of a big box were 7in wide, 9in tall and 2in deep.

Wimmer has 691 classic PC games in his collection



Wimmer with his collection of big boxes

The word 'typical' in the previous sentence hints at why tracing the origins of the big box is difficult. Unlike games for consoles such as the Mega Drive or the PlayStation, where the packaging was regulated by the manufacturer, there was no official standardisation of packaging for PC games.

Instead, PC game publishers gradually converged on what we would recognise as a big box between 1987 and 1991. Before this time, games were packaged in any number of ways. Early games for home computers, such as Zork or Sierra's *The Dark Crystal*, were sold in cardboard sleeves like vinyl records, and some were even sold in plastic bags.

When games began appearing on shelves in boxes, those boxes could vary wildly in size, often dictated by the form factor of the game itself. Atari's boxes, for example, were based around the size of its VCS cartridges, while early PC games required a box that could house one or more 5.25in floppy disks.

In addition, as games became more elaborate, they required even more disks, as well as extensive documentation, resulting in large boxes to hold the manuals (which often also doubled as copy protection systems). Marketing likely played a role too, with big boxes making

computer games stand out over their console-based counterparts.

By 1991, most publishers were packaging their PC games in typical big boxes, and the design was entirely dominant by 1993. That's not to say it was universal, however. PC game packaging never became properly standardised, and variations on it would appear throughout the big box's heyday.

One notable example is the 'trapezoidal' big box of Eidos Interactive,

which appeared exclusively in America from around 1995. Unlike rectangular big boxes, the trapezoidal boxes had diagonal edges that tapered in toward the top of the box. Games sold in trapezoidal boxes include *Tomb Raider*, *Thief: The Dark Project* and *Legacy of Kain: Soul Reaver*.

Even boxes that were the same size and shape could have significant variation. Some boxes would have two parts – a lid and a base, while others would be a solid box with flaps at either end. Some boxes had a cover flap that opened to reveal more key art or further information about the game.

And none of this is to mention what came inside the box, whether the game would be on floppy disks or CD, what the manual would be like, whether the game came with a physical map or other extras. In short, every box was different, which in turn means that every box was differently designed.

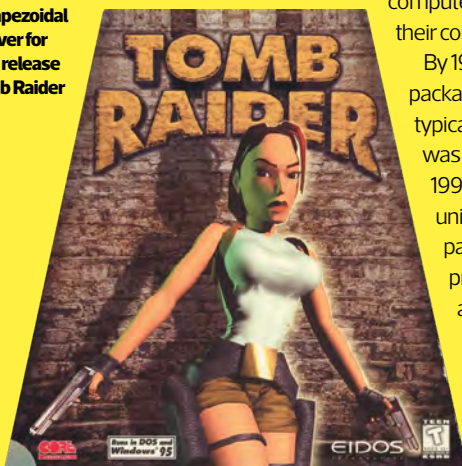
BOXING CLEVER

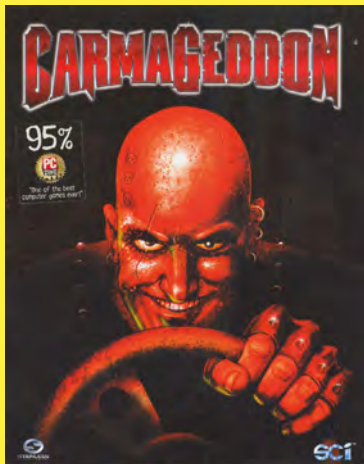
Victoria Hart is a professional graphic designer, artist and gallery director. Today she runs Pink Kitty Creative, her own graphic design firm, but around the turn of the millennium, she worked at Westwood Studios, the developer of *Command & Conquer*, and its many spin-offs and sequels. Specifically, Hart designed the box and packaging for *Tiberian Sun*, *Red Alert 2*, *Blade Runner* and *Dune 2000*.

Designing the packaging for a game was essentially its own project, with its own pipeline for conception, production and manufacturing. 'We talk to the designers to understand the strategy of the game, the style and tone in the mood, and who's going to be playing it,' Hart says. 'Once we have that foundation, we're able to develop concepts and present to the marketing director. Usually, the concepts will go through numerous rounds of revisions before we finalise a look.'

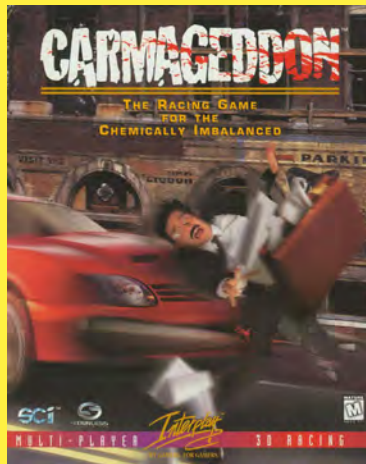
The most important part of any big box was its cover art. This was what any potential player would see when they walked into a shop, so it had to immediately grab their attention, while providing some indication of what the game inside was like. For *Tiberian Sun*, Hart had a strong baseline from which to start.

The trapezoidal box cover for the US release of *Tomb Raider*





The incredible UK box cover of Carmageddon (left) and the less incredible US cover (right)



'The original Command & Conquer box was such a success, we wanted to continue to make the Command & Conquer line follow that single visual head image to get as much impact as possible,' Hart says. 'Because the eyes were covered with goggles, it also gave the viewer the impression that it could be them as the main player.'

Most box art around this time would have been drawn by an artist either employed by or associated with the studio, or in the case of games such as Quake, relied on a simple, yet bold logo. The process of creating Tiberian Sun's box art, however, was much more physical.

'For the Tiberian Sun box, we designed and manufactured the helmet, got a model and photographed the headshots, then effects and graphics were applied over the top of the

By 1991, most publishers were packaging their PC games in typical big boxes

photography,' Hart explains. It wasn't just the front of the box that was important either. 'The back of the box was all about continuing to tell the story and showcasing the key selling features of the game in a visually exciting way,' she adds.

While the visual elements of the box took precedence, the texture of the box was also crucial to making it appealing as a product. 'While designing, I would always keep in mind the end effect with printing and all the different specialty techniques that can be added, such as custom varnishes, chiselled bevels, debossing and special foiling techniques that really help to take the box to the next level and add to the overall design,' Hart says.

Hart's responsibilities didn't end with the box itself. She also designed the manual, the disk label, the case cover and any other items included in the box, such as pins or collector figurines. She cites one particularly memorable example. 'We did a Hummer giveaway contest that was pretty epic, where we created 3D box mock-ups of the Hummer and missiles for the point of purchase displays in Walmart.'

Westwood may have designed its boxes in-house, but this wasn't necessarily the case for other developers. One example is Stainless Games, developer of the Carmageddon series. Like Command & Conquer's box art, the grinning head of Carmageddon's Max Damage makes for one of the most distinctive big box covers.

Unlike Westwood, however, Stainless had almost no involvement in what the final box looked like. 'SCi were the publishers of the original Carmageddon series, and the decisions regarding the box – its design, content and all the rest – were theirs,' says Neil Barnden, co-founder of Stainless. 'SCi did run the artwork past us for our comments / approval. We loved the artwork for Max Damage for the original Carmageddon packaging.'

Having a publisher handle the box design may have taken pressure off the developers, but it also meant the developer had less creative control, which could lead to some unfortunate situations. In the USA, Carmageddon was published by Interplay, which created its own box design with very different art.

'The US publisher didn't even use Max Damage for their box art – there was an awful photo collage of a pedestrian being hit by a car that we had no idea about until we saw the retail packaging,' Barnden says. This isn't the only case of a box art misfire. Hart cites an example from the original box for Red Alert 2, which released in November 2000. 'The inside flap showed the Soviet airplanes attacking New York,' she says. 'The box was printed and then 9/11 happened, so we had to redesign and reprint thousands of units.'

DUSTING OFF

PC games continued to be sold primarily in big boxes until the early 2000s. At this point, the popularity of console gaming was rapidly on the rise, reaching critical mass with the launch of the Xbox and PlayStation 2. With more games demanding space on the shelf, stocking big box PC games became less



Victoria Hart designed many of Westwood's big boxes. Now she runs her own graphic design firm, Pink Kitty Creative



Westwood combined photography, modelling and graphics effects for the cover of Tiberian Sun

cost-effective for stores. Consequently, PC game packaging would shrink to DVD size, initially still in cardboard boxes, but eventually switching to plastic cases little different from those of the Xbox and PS2.

But the story of big boxes doesn't end with the introduction of Steam in 2005. While developers and publishers may have stopped putting games in big boxes, the affection for them from the PC gaming community never waned, as demonstrated by collectors such as Wimmer.

'Then 9/11 happened, so we had to redesign and reprint thousands of units'

Yet while Wimmer's own collection spans four decades, it's only in more recent years that collecting has become a more active hobby. 'In 2012, I rediscovered my love for boxed games, and I started browsing eBay, local classifieds and flea markets to track down all the games I couldn't afford as a teen.'

Indeed, the past decade has seen an explosion of interest in big box collecting, as PC gamers seek to reconnect with the physical roots of the hobby. The Big Box PC Game Collectors Facebook group has almost 6,000 members, while some



The rear of the Tiberian Sun box, designed by Victoria Hart to showcase the game's key selling features

rarer big boxes can sell on eBay for hundreds or even thousands of pounds. For his part, Wimmer isn't interested in either buying or selling boxes for silly amounts of money.

'Prices did go up but I'm not really buying into the current hype of big boxes being investments and so on. I'm still trying to follow my '€10 per game' rule.' Mostly, he's pleased to see new people getting involved in big box collecting. 'I've met a lot of enthusiastic folks from all over the world thanks to those dusty cardboard boxes.'

Wimmer's collection of big box games is also unique. Not in its size or the rarity of the games, but because it's both physical and digital. Shortly after rediscovering his love of big boxes, Wimmer began creating digital 3D models of the boxes and uploading them to his website bigboxcollection.com

'At first, I took photos of the box covers and was sharing them on the net and social media. Due to the varying quality of my photos, I invested in a scanner and replaced the photos one by one with high-res scans,' he says. 'I soon realised that recreating the whole box digitally was what I'd been after – experiments with photos and mock-ups eventually led to the 3D models that are now available.'

The result is a wonderful potted history of PC gaming big boxes, as well as a great resource for people fond of early PC gaming, but who don't have a collection of their own.

Which is the best PC gaming big box? Wimmer is definitive in his conclusion. 'Ultima Underworld. Fantastic cover art by Denis Loubet and it comes with extra manuals, a map and a bag of runes.' **GPC**