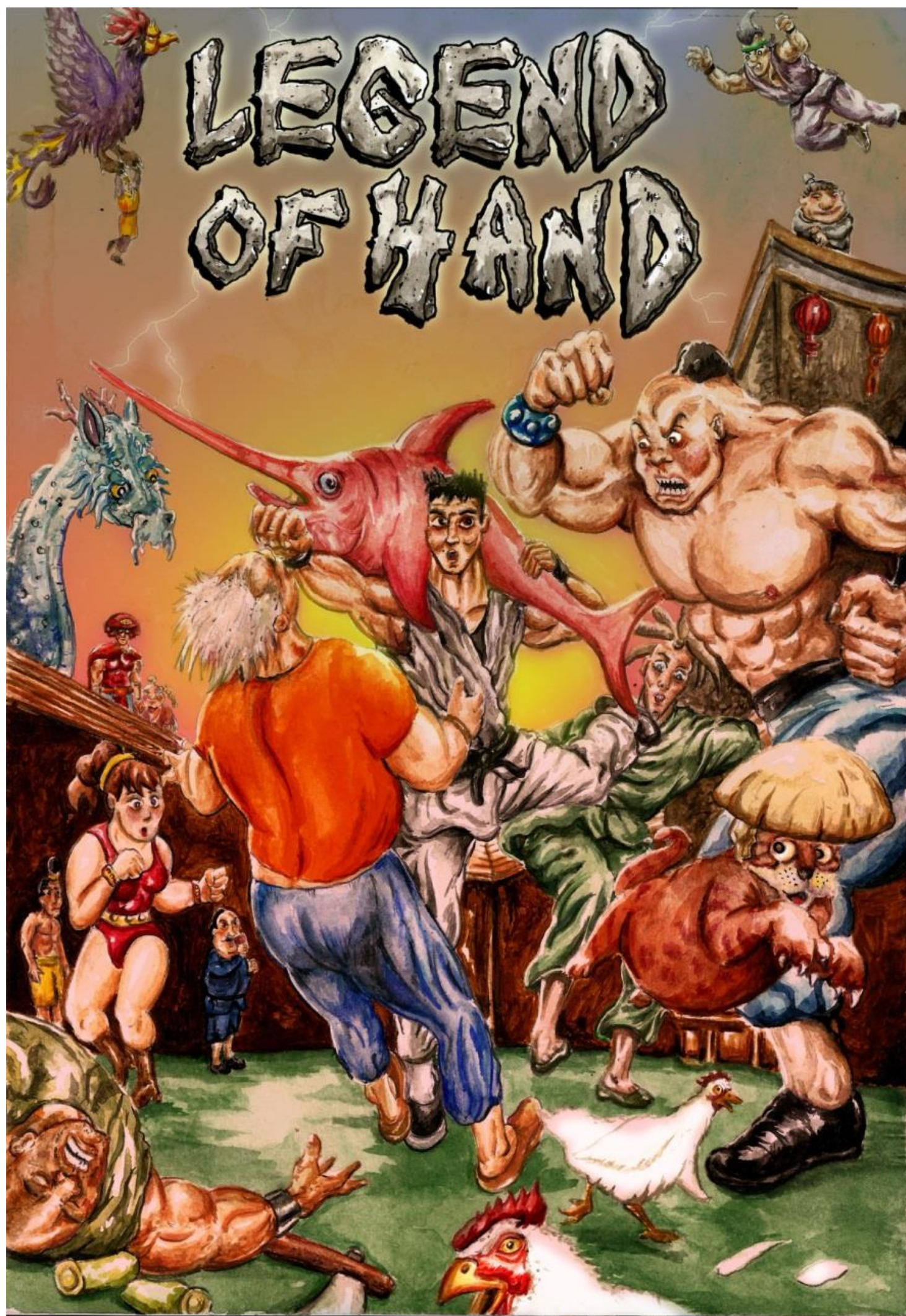


LEGEND OF 4 HAND





Starting Out

I guess the game 'Legend of Hand' (LoH) began over twenty years ago. I was a small child playing 'Way of the Exploding Fist' on the ZX Spectrum. It was the first fighting game I had ever played. It had about four colours on display, a couple of simple backgrounds and a series of pretty much identical looking combatants to challenge in bouts of karate. None of those limitations bothered me - my mind was racing. I wanted to know what the fighters were doing after their bouts, where did they go? Who were their friends? My gaze would drift fondly to the small pixelated houses in the distance; a whole world beyond the onscreen combat was tantalisingly close.

So, I guess that's why I chose to create a guy in a karate outfit to walk across the screen when testing a scrolling background using the software Adventure Game Studio (AGS). Our first game 'Mudlarks' was nearing its end, and we were having a play around with future ideas and concepts. Five minutes after that test, I convinced Shaun that a short adventure game be made, which would include turn-based karate bouts of combat. It was never meant to be any more than a month-long fun little side project. Now, over three years later here it is... gulp.

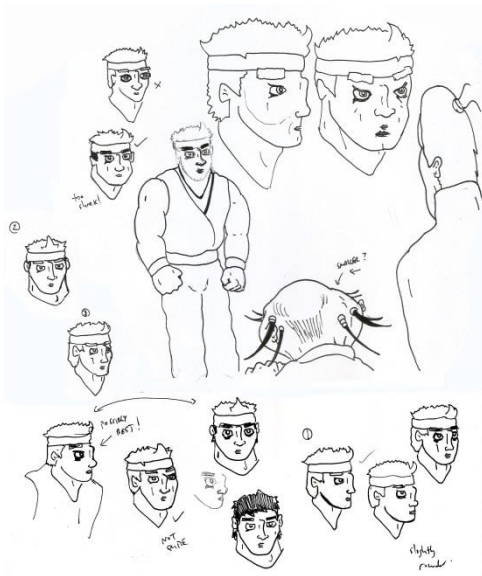
'Legend of Hand' was made by three people. I did the design, art and story and Shaun programmed everything. Underground hobbyist beats' master Finbar (aka Mr Poo) would later create the games' music. It took over three long years to make, a lot longer than we ever imagined. At times we enjoyed the process, at others, we despaired and wanted nothing more than to rid ourselves of the game forever. Working on long projects that span years is very frustrating because it takes so long before you have anything to show for such efforts. For that reason, we broke off several times for short periods. At one point, we took a month off and created an entry for a game jam based on H.P Lovecraft's short story called 'The Terrible Old Man'. Shaun would do this several times for other short games like "aerinde" and "A Date in the Park". Crazy, I know - but then... he is a machine. Creating short games alongside such

a big project was very important. They kept things fresh and kept us motivated.

After several months, we had a playable demo which we unveiled at London's 'AdventureX 2014' - an event that has been growing in popularity in recent years, where modern adventure game designers share and talk about their latest projects. I told everyone who played our short demo that we would have a full game out in a year. A year later, we returned to 'AdventureX 2015' with a slightly more polished version of that same demo - the reality of the project had set in. At that point, I wondered if we would ever complete it. But as we got back our flow and our experience increased, our work rate sped up once more and with a massive push in the next year we somehow reached the final stages.

It was pretty much a journey in how not to make a game. We had so many ideas that we wanted to incorporate that it became quite a puzzle to tie it all together and maintain the main story. I had wanted so much in the way of subplots and mini-games that it was easy to lose sight of the main focus.

Art



Early roughs for the main character. The aim was to create a protagonist typical of the 90's fighting and Kung Fu games. I wanted to see where I could take this seemingly generic stereotype.

It soon became clear that LoH was going to take a big visual effort. I needed an art style that was flexible and could be worked on anywhere anytime. I was tempted to go down the fashionable pixel art route, but then realised that I wasn't going to be able to dedicate countless hours solely on the computer to create art without causing myself some real harm. My eyes fatigue and strain very easily from computer use (no

I didn't want to compromise on the new grand vision I had for the world of LoH. I sat and had a think as to how I could use an art style that was flexible and would allow me to work in different ways - including away from the computer. That was how the black outlines came about. Once I got to grips with the size that sprites and objects needed to be I could pretty much come up with them anywhere.

[illegible]

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a 1pt pixel pencil stroke on digital painting software packages. With this in mind I could easily switch between sketching on paper and working directly on the software. It meant I could always work on some form of art for the game in one way or another - which was vital, as I was often between different houses and computers but always had something I could get on with.

Below: Here is one of many rough animation sequences in the game. I'd often sketch a sequence to get a sense of movement before taking it into the computer. As you may have guessed, these are part of the dancing game sequence. I think I spent over a month creating all the dances for that room.

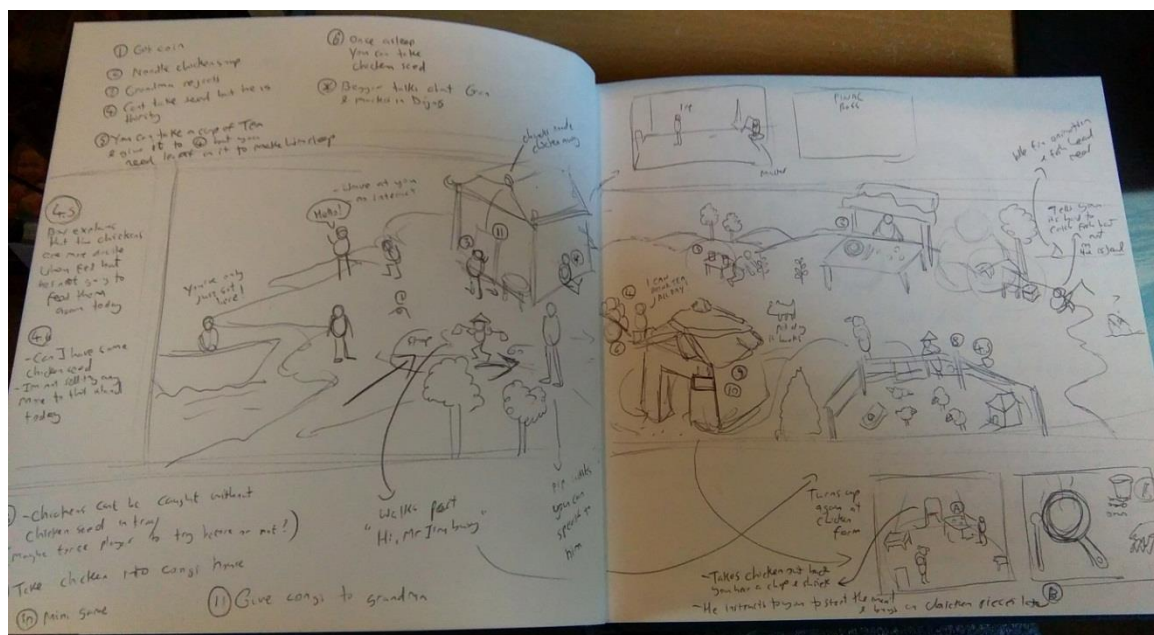


I initially worked online using the free tool 'Pixlr' on lunch breaks and quiet periods at work, which I had previously used for 'Mudlarks'. However, I eventually switched to Photoshop. After some persuasion from Shaun I eventually added the excellent Aseprite tool to my workflow - and boy, did I wish I'd done it sooner! It sped my workflow up tenfold and I could finally test animations properly before passing them onto Shaun, whereas before there had been a lot of guess work with regards to how animations would turn out when using Pixlr. My ability to create clean sprites also improved as time went by. I realised that using a slightly thicker pen would lead to a cleaner scan. As a result, the art in the second half of the game is generally cleaner and smoother.

Another benefit of this style was the speed with which animations could be created. As we had chosen a simplistic style, we were determined to animate as much as possible to make the world more immersive and believable. So, even things like costume changes and carrying around certain larger objects have their own animations. The game has over 200 different characters and 17,700 sprites - pretty big!

Design

Unlike most adventure games, where locations are often revisited, LoH consists of set levels in the form of islands - giving the game a somewhat arcade-like structure. I would initially draft out a rough guide for an island, to gauge how big it would be and jot down some initial puzzle ideas. Once the framework was in place I would create the island landmass. Due to the open nature of the lands, it was easy to add and develop characters and puzzle ideas over time.



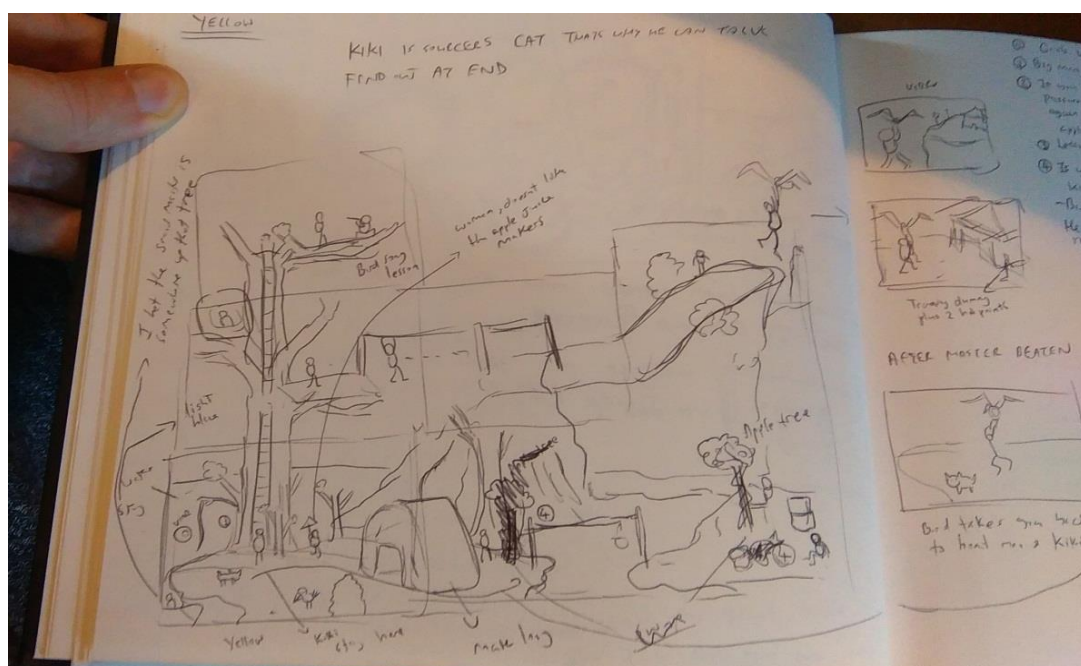
Above: An early mockup for Green Island. I generally had a few puzzles in mind before drafting out the basic layout and mood for an island. These would often change over time.

The basic island level structure was simple - to confront each island's guardian and beat them to progress. To get to them you had to work your way through the islands themselves by solving puzzles, running errands for information, collecting or buying items and challenging other

fighters. The player would inevitably become embroiled in the lives and dilemmas of the characters he or she met along the way.

Another aspect of LoH was the way in which it could suddenly change the player's focus- presenting sudden shifts in gameplay, sometimes without instruction. There is a particular occurrence on Yellow Island, where at a certain point you are put through a series of reflex-based trials before randomly being left to dance away in a night club, seemingly without a designated purpose. This kind of design is confusing and goes against all the traditional adventure game rules, but I wasn't trying to make a conventional adventure game, I was just making a game and this was the sort of game I wanted LoH to be.

We wanted to create an odd world, that at times felt light-hearted and humorous, eerie and fun to explore, but that also carried moments of tension, despair and sorrow. I hope that we achieved this. I've always been fond of games where you could idly get lost in the world and wanted a sense of that by offering stuff to the player beyond the standard quest mission. It was through that vision that a sort of RPG /Adventure hybrid format was used for LoH.



Above: This is the third island's original concept. I remember that right from the start I wanted one island which had the player travelling vertically up ladders (inspired by the 1st 'Castlevania' game on the Gameboy). The rope bridges between trees were dropped but the concept was later used for the fourth island's rope bridge.

Setting and Influences

LoH takes place in a fictional world which takes inspiration from Eastern Asia. If you have played the game I'm sure you will have noticed that the exact time in history is shrouded in ambiguity. Although I did do a lot of research into Chinese, Japanese and Thai history and mythology (particularly ancient Chinese warring dynasties), it was always only to get inspiration and a feel for the cultures rather than directly follow or attempt to recreate any historic timeline or belief system.

As previously stated, the karate games of the Spectrum era were a big influence on LoH. The four islands were originally meant to represent the ZX Spectrum's colour palette. Although we moved away from that basic idea, we kept the four distinctive colours for the islands - green, blue, yellow and red. Amiga games and animations were a big influence as well as the flat colouring style of the 'Tintin' comics. We wanted an adventure game in the mould of a side scrolling fighting game from the late 80's and early 90's. These games would often only have side and diagonal brisk walks and we emulated that here. It was certainly an unusual take, though not one I'd necessarily recreate for future games.

Many of those influences are from childhood memories. I didn't play many games in my late teenage and early adult years. But one game I did play left an impression on me that I will probably remember until I die. That game was 'Shenmue' on the Dreamcast. It was the first time I had played a game in an open world where you could pretty much just spend your time doing whatever you wanted and get lost in side quests. I was blown away by this element and attempted to recreate a sense of this in LoH.

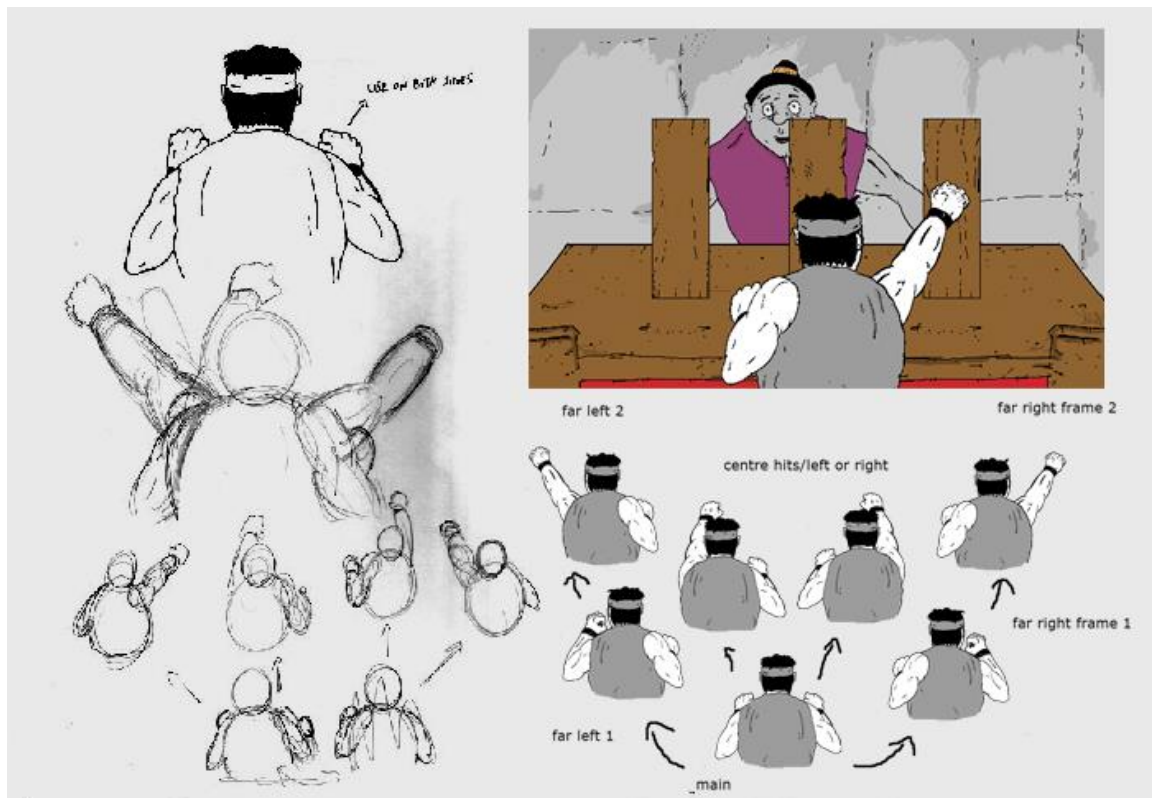
Gameplay

We wanted a game that would be fun to play for RPG fans as well as fans of point and click adventure games. We hoped it would appeal to those who liked these genres but perhaps found them frustrating. As the world of LoH has a more open feel than many adventure games (which are often limited to a few rooms or locations at a time) puzzles were kept fairly logical and simple, with plenty of hints and prompts to help players along.

The mini games scattered throughout the game served multiple purposes. As well as being used as puzzles themselves, I realised that these could also be used as optional skill building aids and ways to

make money in the game to spend on powering up the player's fighting moves.

The fight system was always intended to be light-hearted and fun to give players of RPGs enough to sink their teeth into but also to appeal to those with less interest in complicated turn-based combat. With this in mind, fights were kept short and simple. Often, hints on how to beat the tougher fighters could be discovered by talking to other island inhabitants, thus keeping the adventure aspect of the game paramount.



Above: Rough sketches for the memory punching game. The game is optional but completing it yields rewards. At one stage in development it was based on timed reactions, but this made the challenge overly difficult.

The fighting system went through several alterations during development. At one point, we had a grapple function where the player and the opponent would tussle in the middle of the screen with several possible outcomes. However, this required masses of new animations and was a dropped feature. In the end, we stuck with a varied set of attacks and blocks for each character as well as healing moves and other special attacks. The battles are won and lost based on using a standard risk/ reward system, whereby more advanced moves do more damage but can also backfire and drain the player's energy.

There isn't a need to constantly grind through battles in the game. However, taking time to accept challenges from various fighters results in potentially upgrading your skill set before taking on the Island Masters. As players could also upgrade moves by buying items from various market stalls spread across the islands using money gained through completing tasks and mini games, we hoped to offer variety to players with regards to how they approached the game. For example, one player might choose to seek out all the islanders willing to offer sparring challenges, thus building up his move set through fight experience - another might instead choose to take to the seas as a fisherman to earn the money needed to buy an expensive potion to help him get passed his opponents.



Above: We initially had the player jumping between menu and action to select fight moves (V.1.) Quite late into development Shaun wisely decided to change this so that all the moves could be selected on the fight screen itself (V.2.) This made the fights feel much more exciting.

Music and Sound

The game's music was created on FL studio by Finbar (aka Mr Poo), an old friend who had been making beats for fun for years. He played me an ambient soundtrack he had been working on and I realised at that moment that he might be the man for the job of creating LoH's music. He had also been a huge fan of games in his youth, and I found him to be the perfect fit for LoH's quirky offbeat soundtrack which I think suits the game well. I wanted a large range of musical tracks, with ambient island themed music that would not bore or irritate the player, alongside tracks for events and different rooms. In the end, there are over 40 different tracks used in the game.

We had initially wanted to voice the entire game, but without a budget, that became a pipe dream. So, we got a range of people to do voices,

choosing suggestive sounds, grunts and murmurs over actual speech to play at key moments throughout the game.

I'll now pass you over to Shaun to give you a brief summary of his journey to make the game.

Programming Shaun

Programming this game was quite challenging – when I started working on the “tiny one island game” that was envisioned in 2014 I had no idea what I was getting myself into! My programming skills were limited, having only created ‘Mudlarks’ using Adventure Game Studio (AGS) as well as a couple of other small games. These previous efforts were all very traditional point and click games that did not venture out of the standard gameplay the classic Sierra and Lucasart adventures offered. Tackling the RPG-lite style of LoH was initially very daunting, but with time I learned the ins and outs of AGS, which made things easier. For instance, in 2015 I programmed the base mechanics of the fighting system in LoH – only to gut the whole thing out and started again in 2017 using much easier and more efficient coding that I had picked up along the way. In this sense, programming the game has been a great way to learn the features and limitations of AGS – and many lessons have been learned that we will take into future games. Even though the game may look simple by today’s standards - getting large, parallax scrolling screens to move smoothly within the limitations of AGS was a little challenging but I’m happy with the result.

I would estimate several thousand hours have gone into the coding of LoH as well as many hundreds of hours of testing and bug fixing. For the first year and a half we were taking the odd break here and there, as well as working on other little games to keep us motivated. For the last year and a half, I’ve been working on LoH pretty much in any spare time I have, including most evenings and weekends, as well as the odd day off my actual day job work to get things moving forward. It’s a relief to have it finished but I am certainly proud of what we have achieved!

Conclusion

We would like to thank everyone who purchased Legend of Hand, and this additional DLC!

Keep an eye on our website for updates on our future games:

cadgames.co.uk

Many thanks,
John and Shaun

CLOAK AND DAGGER
GAMES

