Cave Story

Joachim Hesse spoke to the most renowned developer in the shmup scene. We are, of course, talking about Cave, the legendary studio from Shinjuku, Tokyo. Fasten your seatbelts and get your trigger fingers ready…

For fans of shoot-'em-ups today, there's really only one developer to turn to for the best that the modern genre has to offer. That company is called Cave, and it is one of the last studios still creating high-end shmups. The 150 men and women working there created classics like *Dodonpachi*, *Mushihime-sama* and *Ketsui*, and those games are already legendary. The company's loyal fan base is willing to pay a fortune, even for the company's merchandise. And with new games in the pipeline, it's a good reason to spotlight this group of enthusiasts.

If you have ever played Cave's first game, *Donpachi*, you might have recognised a secret message hidden in the default high score table. If you read vertically, the initials will form the words 'TOAPLAN.FOREVER', one of several nods in the game towards a Japanese enterprise called Toaplan. And there is indeed a connection. Toaplan was formed in 1984, and the studio developed some decent arcade games. Most of them were difficult vertical shmups like *Tiger Heli*, *Flying Shark* and *Truxton*. If you've been playing shoot-'em-ups for any length of time, you've probably heard of at least one of them, as they have been converted for several home computers and consoles. Sadly, Toaplan faced bankruptcy in early 1994, with fighting games like Capcom's *Street Fighter II* and SNK's *Fatal Fury 2* being a real epidemic in arcades for which Toaplan didn't have the cure.

Happy birthday

While other employees left Toaplan for companies like Tamsoft, Taito or Square, Kenichi Takano founded a new game enterprise named Cave. "In the game industry at the time, there was a next-generation system boom starting with the Sony PlayStation and the Sega Saturn," recalls Tsuneki Ikeda, the current head

» [Arcade] You can find strange level bosses in Cave games, especially in the ridiculously over-the-top *Pink Sweets*.

» The collection of **Retro Gamer** freelancer Joachim Hesse. Most Cave releases for the home market are produced for Japan only.

programmer of Cave. "As I understand it, our CEO, Kenichi Takano, looked at that as a business opportunity and decided to found Cave."

15 June 1994 is the official date of birth of the company, which would later go on to become the developer of some of the most terrific shooting games ever. A few of the former Toaplan staff started to work for the studio, one of whom was Tsuneki Ikeda, a programmer on *Grind Stormer* and *Batsugun*, the last shoot-'em-ups to ever be released by Toaplan.

"When the company was founded, we had two members of staff who you could call veterans, and the other members were basically new to the industry with one or two years of experience," remembers Ikeda while talking to

Retro Gamer. "In fact, the structure resulted in there being only one person on the team with real experience in creating shooting games."

Times have changed since then. Today, Ikeda is very likely the best-known Cave employee, and a kind of messiah for many shoot-'em-up disciples. He is the mastermind who brought us games like *Dodonpachi*, *Espgaluda* and other Cave classics, and he and his team popularised a new sub-genre called 'danmaku' (bullet curtain), better known as 'bullet hell' or 'maniac' shooters, which are defined by their overwhelming numbers of enemy projectiles.

In hell

Toaplan's *Batsugun* is generally considered the first danmaku game, but the genre wasn't established until *Donpachi* and its successor, *Dodonpachi*, showed up. *Donpachi* represents the rise of Tsuneki Ikeda, the visionary behind decisions like shrinking the hit boxes of the player's ship and implementing deeper scoring tactics. Today bullet patterns and combo systems are commonplace, but back in 1995 when *Donpachi* was released, they weren't.

"With our first title, *Donpachi*, we wanted to put that 'Toaplan' feel out in front, and really you didn't see much in the way of what you would call a 'danmaku'," explains Ikeda. "The next game, *Dodonpachi*, was a title designed fully conscious of the danmaku, and was based on basic rules like 'slow down the bullets', 'fire lots of bullets', 'fire bullets in uniform and direct lines'." That's all there is to it. It's not really magic, but it contains the heart and soul to push players to their limits, and it gives the company the power to survive.

While other former well-known shmup developers like Raizing, Psikyo or Seibu have disappeared, Cave is still in business. "I do believe it's important to keep releasing shooters

» [Arcade] The high score table of Cave's first game, *Donpachi*. Can you find the hidden message?

"I hope that other studios keep releasing shooters so that Cave doesn't wind up as a last bastion"

and I want to do so as long as we can," confesses Ikeda. "If anything, I hope that other companies continue to release shooters so that Cave doesn't wind up as a last bastion."

Cave has developed more than 30 games over the years, many of them considered classics of the shoot-'em-up genre. If you love 2D graphics and your tastes stretch from straightforward concepts like flying an aircraft on screen to weaving a fantasy warrior or a Lolita-like character through an ocean full of bullets, you can't ignore Cave. Games like *Dodonpachi Dai Ou Jou*, *Mushihime-sama Futari*, *Ibara* or *Deathsmiles*, to name just a few, mark the current standard of gameplay evolution in the genre. Cave remains in the vanguard after gathering talented people like Tsuneki Ikeda, Shinobu Yagawa (*Battle Garegga*, *Pink Sweets*) or Takashi Ichimura (*Deathsmiles*, *Ketsui*) from across the industry in one office. Even if you don't like the style and if you're partial to the formative, old-school gameplay mechanics of shmups like *R-Type* or *Raiden*, there's no denying that Cave's games are sophisticated and steeped in love of detail.

The future is now

Thankfully, there is no end in sight. Sure, arcades are moribund all around the world, but Cave is currently experimenting with other sources of income. Due to producer Makoto Asada, you already have access to a nice back catalogue of past Cave arcade games on the Xbox 360, with the company currently watching the performance of *Guwange* for Xbox Live Arcade, its first download-only release. That game's sales will decide whether the 360 port of *Dangun Feveron* will get a disc or download release.

But Cave isn't throwing its eggs in one basket with its 360 ports. Its iPhone games are selling well, having released three acclaimed ports on the App Store since April 2010 – *Espgaluda II*, *Dodonpachi Resurrection* and *Mushihime-sama Bug Panic* – and with an iOS version of *Deathsmiles* in the pipeline. These games are rather cheap to produce and make good money, so maybe the iPhone and its stablemates will save Cave from the same fate as Toaplan 17 years ago. Maybe the iPhone and its future equivalent are the next arcades. Time will tell.
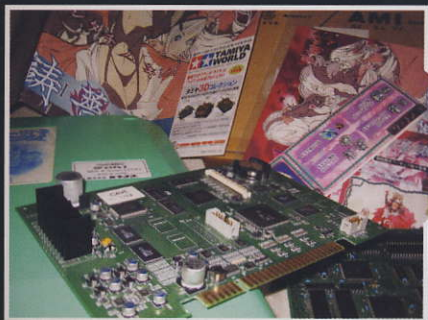
» When connected to an arcade cabinet, these unassuming printed circuit boards will come to glorious life.

Five to play

Most Cave games have already assumed their place in shmup history, and to choose only five of them is like asking a mother which is her favourite child.

Guwange (1999)
■ The oldest game in our list has got an unusual gameplay mechanic. Set in the Muromachi period of Japanese history, you control your character and its shikigami – a kind of drone. While your character walks through the level and has to circumvent basic obstacles like fences, walls and brooks, the shikigami can fly over the screen, changing the direction of your shots and picking up coins from defeated foes for points. Good players can collect coins through the whole game, and if you can't keep up a constant flow of currency, your coin counter will be reset to zero. Hard, but fair.

Dodonpachi Dai Ou Jou (2002)
■ Some games, like *Dodonpachi Dai Ou Jou*, seem to be more work than play. But to think of Cave without thinking about a *Dodonpachi* game is nearly impossible. With *Dodonpachi*, Cave invented its most famous entry in the bullet hell sub-genre. To master *Dai Ou Jou*, you have to know every single attacking formation, and the key to attaining a high score is to kill the enemies constantly – don't wait too long before blasting the next one or your chain is broken. You can chain the whole game like this. It's ultra hard but very satisfying if you finally manage it.

Ketsui (2003)
■ Some shmup fans consider *Ketsui* to be the best game ever, but even so, there are not many players out there who managed to see its true final boss. To survive it once or even to reach the second or third loop of the game is one of gaming's most difficult challenges. If you are looking for serious points, you have to destroy the enemy tanks and planes at close range. The aggressive music perfectly matches the gameplay, too. "Approach your target and attack! Your mission starts now," says the game. "Are you ready?"

Mushihime-sama Futari (2006)
■ Along with *Espgaluda*, *Futari* is a good place to start playing Cave games, with only moderate difficulty on the 360 version's novice mode. The bullet patterns are frequently beautiful, like a sunrise on the beach of a Caribbean island – a beach with prehistoric monsters and giant insects! To really climb the leaderboard while blasting away the evil forces of Queen Larsa, you have to switch between your primary and secondary shot, with the colour of your multiplier indicating which weapon system you should use.

Deathsmiles (2007)
■ Cave has not made many horizontal shmups: after making *Progear* for Capcom in 2001, *Deathsmiles* was its first in six years, but it was a blast! The background screens remind us of animated comic books, and the music could be ripped from a *Castlevania* game. The strange bosses also deserve mention, like the giant mutant cow and the rock-spewing face, but the scoring system isn't as strong as other Cave games. It's a good omen for the future though, as *Deathsmiles* is the first Cave shooter to receive a retail console release in Europe.