COMP 369 Practical Game Programming

Assignment 1

A Glance into the Realm of Gaming Companies

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Abstract

This paper involves highlighting how some game development companies like BioWare, A Thinking Ape, and Phoenix Labs develop from their initial beginnings to produce games that we know today. This will include a insight into the games, genre, and job openings by each company. The goal of this paper is to show how vast game development companies can be in terms of initial development, expansions, and genres. In addition, this is meant to showcase just how important game development companies are and how to analyze current job opportunities with them. It is hoped that after reading this paper, it will inform and inspire people to get into the gaming industry.

When games are released, a lot of the focus is drawn into its gameplay, graphics, and sound. But what about the company or companies that brought about this new and exciting game? Game Development Companies are usually an afterthought in comparison to the game itself, much like admiring fancy jewelry versus how it was brought upon. But without them, most games we know and love would not exist. In this report, I will be presenting my findings on 3 different gaming companies; BioWare, A Thinking Ape, and Phoenix Labs. I will delve into the history, games, and job opportunities at each company in hopes to inspire and inform people on how to get involved with the gaming industry.

BioWare is "[a] true Canadian success story" that started out with 3 doctors - Greg Zeschyjm RayNyzyka, and Augustine Yip (About, c2017). According to BioWare's "About" section (c2017), they started BioWare Corp "with a talented group of game programmers and artists" on February 1st 1995 in Greg's basement. From then, they had their "first big commercial release" on a game called Shattered Steel in collaboration with Pyrotek Game Studios. This was just a "proof-of-concept demo" which gathered attention from many publishers such as Interplay Productions which would later sign a multi-game agreement with them (BioWare, 2017). As stated in the Wikipedia article *BioWare* (2017), they would then go on to create games such as Baldur's Gate and MDK 2. Following this, Baldur's Gate II was released in 2000, but Interplay had to file for bankruptcy due to revenue issues. BioWare soon bounced back and began to work with Infogrames (later renamed to Atari). In November 2005, it

became announced that BioWare and Pandemic Studio would form a partnership being invested by Elevation Partners with a private equity fund (BioWare, 2017). However, in October 2007 Electronic Arts bought out this partnership, which reshaped BioWare to become a unit of EA (BioWare, 2017). They still retained their own branding, and eventually worked with Mythic Entertainment under a new structural grouping in EA regarded as the role-playing and massively multiplayer online games group. BioWare would then go on to create a multitude of successful games including the critically acclaimed series of Mass Effect, Dragon Age, and Stars War. On September 18, 2012 Ray Muzyka and Greg Zeschuk would announce their retirement, eventually leaving Casey Hudson to become the general manager at the present time. (BioWare, 2017) BioWare as a company may have had a few bumps in the road, but they created many amazing games and has grown to 800 employees according to the Wikipedia stats in 2010 (Bioware 2017).

BioWare has developed a multitude of games since their establishment in 1995. Currently to date BioWare has developed 29 games, and we will be going through their most acclaimed series Mass Effect, Dragon Age, and Baldur's Gate (BioWare, 2017).

The Mass Effect series has been one of the most prominent products by BioWare. The series itself have sold over 14 million units as of July 5, 2014 (Mass Effect, 2017). The Mass Effect series has 4 main games - Mass Effect, Mass Effect 2, Mass Effect 3, and Mass Effect Andromeda with two iOS games - Mass Effect Galaxy and Mass Effect Infiltrator. In addition BioWare also released two additional mobile apps

- Mass Effect Datapad and Mass Effect: Andromeda APEX HQ to use in conjunction with their main games for extra features. The first 3 main games of the Mass Effect series takes place in a fictional universe of the Milky Way near the end of the 22nd century revolving around the character Commander Shepard (Mass Effect, 2017). His mission is to save the galaxy from a powerful threat know as the Reapers and their allies. In the series you are thrown into a Sci-Fri universe with a third-person RPG style shooter combat system. The progression of the series leads to the eventual final confrontation with the Reapers while entertaining you with a multitude of side quests and missions. In the latest release of the Mass Effect series - Mass Effect Andromeda takes place in the Andromeda galaxy, 634 years later from the earlier games and follows around either Scott or Sara Ryder (Mass Effect, 2017). You are tasked with finding humanity's home world in a similar gaming style to the previous games. The Mass Effect series features a "Choose your adventure" style where your decisions actively affect how the game progresses. According to Wikipedia article *Mass Effect* (2017) the first 3 main games leveraged the Unreal Engine 3 while for Mass Effect: Andromeda changed to the Frostbite 3 Engine. The Mass Effect series is targeted for the Xbox, PC and PS3 platforms (and the WII U for Mass Effect 3).

The Dragon Age series is an RPG fantasy released for PC, Xbox and Playstation featuring the a third-person type of camera angle. The Dragon Age series has 3 main games - Dragon Age: Origins, Dragon Age II, and Dragon Age: Inquisition with an assortment of expansion packs and DLC for each. The Dragon Age series takes place in the mythical world of Thedas to fight against the darkspawn with sidequests and

twists based on your decisions (Dragon Age, 2017). The games feature a RPG combat

system but in real-time with control over the movement of the characters. In terms of the

technology that Dragon Age uses, they have transitioned from the Eclipse Engine in

Dragon Age: Origins to Lycium Engine in Dragon Age II to Frostbite 3 in Dragon Age:

Inquisition (Bioware 2017). The Dragon Age series leverages DLC and expansion pack

which increase sale revenue even after the initial game release. In addition to this, there

is not official release on the sales number so it is hard to pinpoint collectively its market

sales.

The Baldur's Gate series is franchise of RPG genre similar to Dungeons &

Dragons style of play. It features a unique overhead third-person camera centered

around an orphan searching for his/her's foster father (Baldur's Gate (series), 2017).

According to Wikipedia's article *Baldur's Gate (series)* the original release of Baldur's

Gate was in 1998 with an expansion called Baldur's Gate Tales of the Sword Coast the

next year. The article states that a sequence was then release in 200 Baldur's Gate II:

Shadows of Amn, with another expansion following the year after in 2001 called

Baldur's Gate II: Throne of Bhaal. These games were released on PC and Mac,

developed by BioWare, but in the following year a Spin-off was developed called

Baldur's Gate: Dark Alliance I and II developed by Snowblind Studios and Black Isle

Studios respectively (Baldur's Gate (series), 2017). Fast-forward to 2012, Enhanced

Editions of Baldur's Gate I and II were released by Overhaul Games using an Enhanced

version of the Infinity engine used in earlier games (Baldur's Gate (series), 2017). In

addition, another revival of the game was produced in 2016 called Baldur's Gate: Siege

of Dragonspear developed by Beamdog. These Enhanced editions were developed for PC, Mac, Android and IOS. A third game was in development by Black Isle Studios called The Black Hound, but was cancelled by Interplay Entertainment Corp (Baldur's Gate (series), 2017). Again the figures for the exact sale is hard to calculate due to sale release and a multitude of games, however it is estimated that over the entire series, over 8 million copies were sold (MacKendrick, 2013).

Currently BioWare has job openings in Edmonton for their Software Development. According to their official BioWare website (c2017), their current positions include Graphics, Cinematic Tools, Systems, and Tools Programmer for Dragon Age Franchise, UX, Gameplay Animation, Sr. Systems, and Gameplay Programmer for Anthem. To be a programmer you need general knowledge of good software programming practices, be detailed-oriented, and have excellent problem solving skills. However, as listed above, there are a multitude of different programming positions, each requiring different sub-skill sets. Depending on the position, you may need to know a multitude of different programming languages such as Python, C, C++, C#, etc.. This may also range from the type of programming you know, specifically A.I based when you are a Gameplay Programmer or pipeline algorithm for Systems. Out of these openings, the job I would like the most would be Gameplay Programmer and to accomplish this I would have to take courses in A.I algorithms, assembler, and scripting languages. BioWare seems to prioritize work-life balance and would be a fascinating company to work for.

A Thinking Ape is a mobile and web game development company that was established in 2008 (The Shrewdness of Apes, c2016). According to their official site (c2016), A Thinking Ape were founded as a startup in Sunnyvale, California by two Amazon engineers - Kenshi and Wilkins. However, their first application was not a game, it was a group chat platform called Chatterous. As their social application grew success, they saw how similarities of communities that revolved around their application could be leveraged into games. Their focus was to incorporate social aspects into games and create vibrant communities, which in turn would boost the success of the game. In later years, they would expand their company, relocate to Vancouver and go on to develop social games such as Kingdoms at War, Smash Monsters, Casino X and Party in My Dorm (The Shrewdness of Apes, c2016).

One of their first games to be developed in this mindset was Kingdoms at War. Kingdoms at War is a medieval style social game that revolves around building an empire and conquer your foes. The resources required to expand your empire are limited, and replenish with time. There are however "Pay-to-Win" additions to the game which you can purchase to gain a competitive advantage. A Thinking Ape pulls most of their revenue from these purchases and advertisements (Verem 2011). A major feature of this game was the aspect of socialism in the game to survive and thrive. Specially, there are guilds were like-minded players could join and ally with to further themselves in the game. Some similar games they have developed are Smash Monsters and Party in My Dorm. These games are similar to Kingdoms at War in which you have limited resources that accumulate over time used to upgrade and further your "empire"

whichever that may be. In these cases for Smash Monsters, they are your city, and for party in My Dorm, they are your dorm. Casino X is a social casino game that is based around casino games, however you are able to gain rewards by sending/receiving them from your friends. Finally, they have a game in development called Kingdoms of Heckfire which is once again similar to Kingdoms at War, but feature a more animated artwork and real-time strategy combat system. The main concept from game to game have not changed drastically; focusing on the social aspect of the game and applying themes and features around it. In terms of revenue, they have not released exact numbers but have generalized a gross revenue of at least $1 million dollars per month (Verem 2011). Overall, A Thinking Ape company seems to have developed a reliable formula of success by incorporating a social aspect into their games.

Currently there are not many open positions at A Thinking Ape; one to be specific. It is a 3 month contract as a Marketing Artist for their ad campaigns on their new and existing games. This will primarily focus on motion, static, and video graphic design in preparation for their world-wide launch and require a high skill set in graphic design. This would not be my ideal choice for employment as I do not have artistic skills, however if I did want to be employed in this position, I would take courses in graphic design. If A Thinking Ape did have some open Dev positions in the future, I would definitely be interested.

Phoenix Labs is a game development company, founded in 2014 by former "Riot Games Developers" Jesse Houston, Sean Bender and Robin Mayne (Our Story, n.d.).

According to an article by Conditt (2016), Phoenix Labs was founded to bring "a new, unique approach to crafting AAA experiences". Currently Phoenix Labs does not have any official games released, they do have a game currently in Alpha called Dauntless. The game was first revealed during the "The Game Awards in December 2016" and have garnered a lot of attention and interest from players (Dauntless (video game), 2017). This in turn has lead to transparency in their development plans to garner feedback from their fans. Not surprisingly, this has boosted the reputation of the game, because a game that is actively tailored to their audience will attract a good public image. Currently to date, Phoenix Labs has "40 close-knit developers" and is located in Vancouver B.C (Our Story, n.d.).

Dauntless is a "free-to-play" action RPG game to be released on Windows and consoles (to be announced). Dauntless takes place in a "fantasy setting where dinosaur-like Behemoths" roam the world devouring humans (Dauntless (video game), 2017). You take on the role of a Slayer to battle, loot, and defeat these Behemoths single-handedly or with up to four people. According to Wikipedia's article *Dauntless (video game)*, Dauntless was heavily inspired by "Capcom's Monster Hunter series" and features a third-person camera view, upgradable equipment, and co-op style gameplay. It also states that Dauntless was developed with the Unreal Engine 4, and promises to focus on achievable rewards through skill - rather than through microtransactions. Many fans of the Monster Hunter series have flocked to this game and are intrigued by it's animated artwork. There aren't any sales at the moment for Dauntless released as it is still in alpha, however there are "Founder Packs" which you are able to purchase to

obtain early access and rewards in-game. Although this game is still in development, it shows a lot of promise with it's unique mesh of artwork and gameplay.

Phoenix Labs does not have any open positions at the moment. However, some steps to ensure I am up-to-date on any upcoming positions would be to contact them directly and introduce myself and my interest in working at their company. Some ways to improve my chances of being hired would be to learn as much as I can in development with the Unreal Engine 4, and take courses in the type of technology they mainly use. I am extremely excited with what Phoenix Labs has to offer.

Researching these companies really put into perspective just how little resources game development companies have when they first start out. When you look at big companies like BioWare, it's really hard to picture yourself achieving such an expansion. However, it's all the more inspiring when you found out just how little they start out with, and how much they expanded. There are also many different technological mediums as we have explored that you may use to express your creativity. Ranging from mobile, to consoles, to PCs and many more! In addition, a lot of the 'AAA' games that are released takes years and a multitude of people to develop. This just shows how much effort it takes to produce, develop, and maintain these games. It takes artists, voice actors, programmers, and many more in a collaborative effort to run a smooth operation. There are many positions available in game development companies and the skillsets required for each can be drastically different. As well, the learning can be highly specialized requiring multiple courses and training to

become qualified. However, that should not deter you from chasing after those positions; it should inspire you to keep on learning! Overall, there is definitely more than meets the eye with game development companies, and most of the time, they are underappreciated for producing the games we know and love.

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