

Game theory



Raccoon Rising: PixelNAUTS supplied the stunning 3D art and animation for this popular new iPhone/iPad game app.

Combine talent, education, and entrepreneurial drive. Place in incubator. In St. Catharines, the result is a rising digital media star called PixelNAUTS.

Young gamers take note: it really is possible to have a career (and even your own business) in the gaming industry. Spending a lot of time playing games is definitely part of the success formula, but you'll also need talent, education, drive, and the ability to find and leverage any support that's available. Alex Golebiowski and Chris Iacobucci have these qualities in spades, and their company PixelNAUTS is the result.

Both lifelong gamers, the partners met while completing Seneca College's Digital Media Arts program in Toronto.

"I'd taken Sheridan College's arts fundamentals program, and then found exactly what I needed at Seneca," says Golebiowski. "It was definitely what I was looking for. The program gave me practical skills for employment and later my own company."

Iacobucci's background is similar. Also an avid gamer, he took computer programming courses in high school, and later entered a game in an independent games conference in California.

"I went on a tour of the Seneca program and I was very impressed," he says. "Alex and I were lucky to be in the program at a time when they had just installed a lot of new technology that was very useful to us. We had also great teachers and the best course format. But we were both only interested in getting into games. And we always talked about having a company some day."

Derek Elliot, who was program co-ordinator and a teacher in Seneca's program, is a partner in Compulsion Games in Montreal. Elliot, who recently hired PixelNAUTS to work on his own company's latest Xbox game, says the partners have demonstrated that they have what it takes to make it in the dog-eat-dog gaming world.

"It's never easy starting your own venture," says Elliot, "especially in this case where you're competing against large overseas development companies, with low overhead and development costs. They've obviously got the entrepreneurial spirit, and they're very personable and client-oriented. They are able to assess a situation and come up with multiple suggestions and resolutions. They've also shown fortitude in getting the job done, which is a very important trait to have at crunch times."

After college, the future PixelNAUTS partners worked on various projects in digital media over the next few years. They both eventually were hired by Silicon Knights, a long-established game developer.



Alex Golebiowski and Chris Iacobucci are now focussing on game development.

"We were on the same team at Silicon Knights, and we knew how important it is to develop a strong core team," says Alex. "We gained a lot valuable experience there. When we both left Silicon Knights our purpose wasn't necessarily to start a company, and we were both applying for jobs. But as soon as we heard about the support that was available from nGen, we jumped at the chance."

The Niagara Interactive Media Generator, (nGen) is the hub for interactive digital media project and business development in the region. nGen jump-starts and grows young companies with tenancy, mentorship, seminars, networking, interactive digital media projects, and access to technology. Its showcase is a \$3 million, state-of-the-art digital media facility "the Generator at one", in downtown St. Catharines.

"We had to compete to get the spot at nGen," says Chris. "We had to develop a business plan, and show the (nGen) board what we wanted to do and how we were going to do it. There are so many advantages: Silicon Knights is next door to us here."

The partners had planned for PixelNAUTS to be an "outsourcer", providing art and animation services on contract to large firms. But soon after they set up shop at nGen in January, 2011, they discovered that their company had greater potential. PixelNAUTS is now taking advantage of the huge market for "app" games that run on smart phones and tablet computers.

"Over the last year we've really focussed on game development," says Alex. "App games are far cheaper to develop, because the platform is less powerful. There's a shorter development cycle, so less cash is needed to launch a new game."

Raccoon Rising is a perfect example of this process at work. PixelNAUTS co-developed the iPhone game app with Romper Games of Toronto. Copy right© 2012 OBR Ontario Business Report | Privacy

"It's a good way to go," says Chris. "It's risky, but the risks can pay off in the future. Since we are focussing on smaller games with lower development costs, we will have a better chance of producing something that's going to be a hit."

According to industry veteran Derek Elliot, the biggest challenge for PixelNAUTS is to establish itself in the industry. His Compulsion Games is an independent video-game developer that works with partners in North America, Europe and Asia.

"The most difficult thing for them to accomplish is to make their name," he says. "Currently there is a lot of competition going on in Canada, and producers like me always need some "go-to" people when things get tight with the local team and you need some supplementing of resources. Once they have this loop, then they will likely see more and more work coming their way."

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