



Cover story: Reel Appeal p.29

Teaming with new ideas



At a time when the development world is so obsessed with scale, it's perhaps fitting that we've produced the biggest issue of *Develop* so far.

Teams across the planet are hoping to suck up new staff. From where, it's not certain; some say there are more open

posts than there are people to fill them – an issue we've taken a look at over the page. It's a prospect made all the more daunting by the very fact that games themselves don't exactly make the situation any better. What industries, after all, demand both technical knowledge *and* creative talent from its staff?

But with opportunities all over it shouldn't be that worrying, then, that avenues are opening up to blur the lines between what were once sub-sectors in development. There are at least two instances in this issue of companies exploiting their mobile casual games knowledge in other areas; multiple voices pushing or excited by digital downloads; countless companies scaling up; and a dedicated look at why movie men are so keen to get in on the game as well.

That latter point won't solve the issues presented by team ramp-up, however – unless Steven Spielberg is as handy at C++ as he is pre-visualisation? – but there's certainly something to be said for sharing creativity.

Of course, one of the reasons for our scale this month is the *Develop In Brighton* conference. With its committed view to exploring the best and brightest ideas in games development, it looks set to be a great event, especially with the likes of the *Develop Industry Excellence Awards* on the roster.

The magazine will be out in force in Brighton – you may even be reading this in a crafty stolen moment during a session – we hope to see you there.

Michael.French@intentmedia.co.uk

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Develop Magazine
St. Andrew House
46-48 St. Andrew Street
Hertford, Herts. SG14 1JA

Tel: 01992 535646 Fax: 01992 535648

intentmedia



Editor

Michael French
michael.french@intentmedia.co.uk

Technology editor

Jon Jordan
jon.jordan@intentmedia.co.uk

Features editor

João Diniz Sanches
joao@sancho.com

Executive Editor

Owain Bennallack
owain.bennallack@intentmedia.co.uk

Managing editor

Lisa Foster
lisa.foster@intentmedia.co.uk

Advertising manager

Chris Buckley
chris.buckley@intentmedia.co.uk

Advertising executive

Katie Rawlings
katie.rawlings@intentmedia.co.uk

Designer

Dan Bennett
dan.bennett@intentmedia.co.uk

Publisher

Stuart Dinsey
stuart.dinsey@intentmedia.co.uk

Production Editor

Samantha Loveday
samantha.loveday@intentmedia.co.uk

Subscriptions

For all enquiries, please email:
dev.subscriptions@c-ams.com

Contributors: John Brambhall, Justin Fellner, Alexander L. Fernandez, Rick Gibson, Chris Keegan, Michel Krupalon, Ian Livingstone, Mark Bain, James Thomson, Adi Wilmson and Chris Wright

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The Resource War



There's no disagreement about the power of outsourcing. But with so many now relying on it to aid their projects or offer complementary services, the fight over the best outsourcers means things could get heated, warns Streamline Studios' **Alexander L. Fernández**...

Two years ago I wrote an article for *Develop* to introduce the relatively obscure process of outsourcing to an industry that had yet to discover its benefits. The lay of the land was rather simple then – a handful of diehard outsourcing providers scattered around the globe with forward-thinking developers and publishers as clients. For most, outsourcing was an option of last resort, a stark contrast to today's climate in which the industry clamours to secure and integrate winning outsourcing strategies.

Indeed, as demands for content creation increase exponentially, we have arrived at a time when outsourcing resources are highly contested. We have entered the resource war. Outsourcing has grown from an option of last resort to an integral part of the development process that every publisher must consider. Some companies even approach outsourcing defensively, trying to buy up the major players to ensure their access to talent while denying their competitors the same access.

Though industry logic considers acquisitions to be a smart move and no doubt beneficial for the company being acquired, history would show otherwise. After all, it's not about what you have, but how you use it. Winning outsource strategies are built upon a keen sense of resource allocation, a deep understanding of production, and last but not least, an appreciation for controlled chaos. But before getting deeper into these issues, let's go back in time and discover just how we got here.

"We have entered the resource war: some approach outsourcing defensively, trying to buy up the major players to ensure access to talent and deny competitors the same access..."

ORIGINS

Five years ago publishers could rely on a stack of developers ready to work on projects at a moment's notice in an environment that was rife with relaxed dispositions and almost zero project management. Many believed that missed deadlines and projects falling behind was the norm rather than the exception. After all we're game developers – who cares if we miss our ship dates?

Unbeknownst to us all the industry was entering a period of severe change, one ushered in by licensed IP with huge marketing spends and tightly targeted release dates. The old development methods were thrown out the window and confidence in the 'mega development' system began to take hold under the logic of a simple formula: increased manpower = faster production time = quicker return on investment. The super development team of over 100 staff came into being along with the constant drum beat to increase team sizes.

The pressures behind this increase were simple: technology had advanced, revenue and budgets were up, and gamers were anxious for new products. When Microsoft and Sony announced their new consoles, it was a logical conclusion that next-generation development would mean teams of over 150 staff members along with soaring development costs, all resulting in tremendous video game experiences. Publishers continued to ramp-up in size without reconsidering their core assumptions.

With the desire for increased manpower, outsourcing quickly became part of every publisher and developer's toolbox. With outsourcing, resources could be added on a project-by-project basis without the attendant overhead and logistical difficulties of hiring, training and retaining talent in-house.

At Streamline Studios, where we have provided creative and engineering outsource solutions for over five years, we've watched as the industry has grown to accept the concept of outsourcing as a production strategy. This process took several years to take hold but was shaped by the dedication of leading outsource providers worldwide. Companies such as Massive Black, Nikitova and Dhruva (and ourselves) spent the better half of this decade redefining the process by investing significant amounts of capital and time into redefining pipelines and educating an industry on the benefits outsourcing brings when utilized properly.

PRACTICALITIES

Outsourcing isn't a magic bullet. It isn't going to save your company or your project if you have deep procedural flaws. In fact, it's going to reveal severe issues within your company, development process, and production team while at the same time forcing your business to communicate more effectively. If this flat-out frightens you, outsourcing isn't for you, but if you're just a little apprehensive, you're in luck as we're going to get down to the nitty-gritty of how to make it work.

Outsourcing should be considered as an important development strategy from day one. Before you ever decide to embark upon your development the production design of your project should include a section on outsourcing. You will save your production a world of problems by spending a few days beforehand researching who you might want to work with – and more importantly how you're going to work with them.

There are three things to remember when using outsourcers: **Communication:** No matter how great your documents are or how you pride yourself on being the most effective communicator in the world, outsourcing is an organic process that requires constant communication. When you decide to utilize outsourcing services be sure to have a single point of contact that is 100 per cent dedicated to the process. Having your lead artist or programmer manage the relationship while they have their own workload is usually counterproductive. After

all you've decided to use outsourcing based on your production needs and ineffective management is only going to handcuff your ability to get the productivity gains you need.

Needs versus Wants: You want it all, but realise you can't produce the work internally at your studio. Asking an outsourcing company to produce the miracle you can't achieve internally is the next best option. But before spending the rest of your days on your knees praying for your job when the process fails because you didn't know what you wanted, focus on what you need rather than what you want. These are two different things and when engaging in any form of outsourcing relationship you will be asking the outsourcing company to build to your

specifications. If you are a design-driven company and have changing needs then your outsourcing strategy will also feel this crunch and will need to be treated differently than just plainly as work for hire. Your specifications dictate the amount of time they will spend on your project, and this impacts their business model. Should the specifications change significantly the outsourcing company will need to reassess the project and provide you updated pricing reflecting your specification change.

This can be avoided by understanding your production needs prior to contacting an outsourcing provider or by working with an outsourcer in order to establish your pipeline needs at the pre-production phase of the project.

You Get What You Pay For: A good deal

is hard to resist, but before you jump into the wonderful world of emerging markets ask yourself a few questions. Are you prepared to make a substantial investment in communication processes? Are you prepared to communicate with individuals who may or may not understand your culture? Are you willing to understand someone else's culture? Do you have adequate bandwidth to invest into training and managing external resources?

Next-generation development requires knowledgeable staff no matter what part of the world you're in, and this costs money. It may surprise some readers to learn that there are studios in the East that charge man-month rates that are on par to the US. Before jumping up and down, remember one thing: globalization is the process in which countries and people build themselves into equals. Video games are no exception to this rule and as the good studios from these markets come into their own their prices do as well, which is a good thing. If you want quality, be prepared to pay. If you're cheap and unrealistic, be prepared to receive what you've paid for and don't complain. You get what you pay for.

A NEW WAY OF THINKING

Throwing more bodies onto a development project does not guarantee success. We've all seen 300-strong development teams fail to deliver. The industry's old way of solving production problems aren't working and its time that we face reality. Next-generation development is all about content management and smart production design.

Find an outsourcing partner that can grow with your needs and integrate processes that it refines during its work with you. By working with an outsourcer that looks long term your development will not only benefit from increased manpower, but also by a streamlined communication process. Any proven outsource company will arrive with a wealth of experience that can help ensure your production stays on course. Don't be afraid to ask.

As service-based companies that work on multiple projects assisting developers and publishers worldwide, outsourcers are here to help you. By utilizing their expertise and resources in an intelligent fashion your development needs will be met. However, do note that as with most relationships in life, it takes two to make it great and only one to make it terrible. Being realistic and open to your partner's suggestions are the first steps to ensuring a fruitful development experience.

■ www.streamline-studios.com

“Outsourcing isn't going to save your company or your project if you have deep procedural flaws. Throwing more bodies onto a project does not guarantee success...”

MINIBIO



Alexander L. Fernandez is the managing director of Streamline Studios, an outsource studio in the Netherlands