

# Calling all the heroes



Famous game developers should do more to help newcomers to the industry, argues **Marque Pierre Sondergaard**. Less famous ones who take the lead may become legends in their own right...



## MINIBIO

Marque Pierre Sondergaard wasted years before twigging that investment banking, sales, marketing and project management wasn't for him. Today he is a games design and art student at the University of Teesside, where he can be found trying to overturn the system through the Games Studies Society, which also doubles as the first non-US IGDA Student Chapter.

To contact him, email [B2075217@tees.ac.uk](mailto:B2075217@tees.ac.uk) and arrange an intimate session with tomorrow's superstar employees, or else forever be damned to a life lived in fear of a looming silhouette with a Hawaii shirt and an American twang.

**F**unny how your perspective changes over the years. And how completely impossible it is to change it back once your virgin naivete has been soiled.

In the first two months of studying games design at the University of Teesside, two major British developers came to see the students. Rare sent two coders and a stack of brochures to our local job fair. Its message was – we want you when you are good enough. Blitz was next: four managers, including old school legend Philip Oliver, and two former Teesside students who had spent their work placement year at Blitz. Their message was – we want you, now and forever.

Seeing one of the Oliver twins live was like being taught the moonwalk by Michael Jackson. When Philip Oliver shyly admitted that “he hoped that maybe a few of you would be interested in working for Blitz Games”, a lecture theatre jam-packed with 200-plus games students was on the point of screaming “You don't have to be so nice to us, we all want to work for you!” Before that day, most of those very same students would have sneered, “I don't want to work on no kiddie games.”

The ability to source skilled employees has become a strategic parameter in most industries, including games. As Rusty Rueff, senior VP of human resources at Electronic Arts, lamented recently in *Fast Company*, “Creative talent is the scarcest resource on the planet. There's not enough talent to go around.”

## SAVE THE WORLD

So who has the power to avert the impending doom? You do. All you smart, farsighted games developers can rectify this, for the betterment of everybody.

I know, I know. Just making it past the next milestone is the modus operandi of most in the development industry. Everywhere you go developers are taking cover, fearing crisis, crunches and consolidation, or bad news by any other name starting with C.

But think back to the pre-dot.com days. Those launching hi-tech ventures struggled with the same problems. At some point such concepts become mainstream, and then no end of financiers want to jump onto the bandwagon. Surviving games development studios might find themselves in front of a financial fire hydrant, where finance is no longer the key to winning – having enough talented people on staff will top the agenda. Are you planning for that day?

Want to know more? An underground resistance movement is brewing, and you have friends inside. If

the school wasn't going to attract more developers to spend time with us, we realised we had to do it ourselves. We started a Games Studies Society with the explicit aim of reeling in elusive industry contacts.

Like all fame seeking youngsters, we are ruthless; we will stop at nothing; we will develop games when we should be asleep; we will polish our portfolios when we should be revising; we will even work for free when we should be in school. We are students who measure themselves against industry requirements rather than curriculum requirements.

We are a giant resource, waiting to be tapped.

## THE KIDS FROM FAME

We realised that the talented Oliver Davies was hiding in our backyard. Davies worked on such blockbusters as *Goldeneye*, *Donkey Kong Country*, *Banjo Kazooie* and what became *The Getaway*. Today he lives a monk-like existence at Lost World Designs. Until, that is, we forced, threatened, blackmailed and gently persuaded him into meeting us.

A noticeably nervous Mr. Davies relied on unsightly amounts of Dr. Pepper to get him through what became a two-hour long address to a packed lecture theatre. We were treated to secrets on tiered game design, anecdotes on the ups and downs of working a project involving Miyamoto-san and a very patient Q&A.

And we loved it! Those 105 minutes felt like drinking from a fire hydrant on a hot summer day. Our forums were bustling with posts like “Another victory for the John Romero of the consoles!” Oliver Davies was our hero. Had he been the hiring manager of Megacorp Ultragames, we would have sold our academic souls and left to work there the next day.

What would you say to an hour of undivided attention from 200 of the games superstars of tomorrow? It's yours for the asking. Not only would it mean a huge leap in the quality of the candidates produced by the game education mill, it would cement your company's position on the map with those potential employees.

What's the alternative? Do you do more press than Peter Molyneux? Can you outdo EA's advertising budget? Do you have bigger hits than Rockstar?

I remember wondering how on Earth chief executive officer Philip Oliver could justify spending the better half of a day – along with several key managers – talking to students, when less could have done the job? I thought it must be pure charity on his part.

What a difference a year makes. Now I know it was simply astute business thinking in action. ■