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Windy Games Interview

This interview has been edited and condensed.

SPELUNKING THE WINDING WAYS OF GAME DEVELOPMENT WITH WINDY GAMES

Mighty stalagmites are growing from the ground, stalactites hanging from the ceiling. In extreme humidity, four New York game developers make their way — in white protective jump suits and helmets — through a vast, intimidating cave system. One of the developer-explorers notices reflections off the wet surfaces of the stones, another, the light conditions in the cave. Yet another tries to get a feel for the shapes of the formations, while the fourth voyager wonders where someone would hide a treasure in this cave.

The four members of Windy Games, Adam Michaan, Alexander Ahlberg, Emily Compton, and Tom Brooks II, took a tour through Howe Caverns in upstate New York, conducting field research for their upcoming title *Miasma Caves*, a JRPG and cave-exploration game for which they need to generate an authentic cave environment.

Windy Games was founded by Adam, right out of college. He set out with his skills and his vision of making his own game. Just as anyone who ventures out into such a new experience, Michaan faced uncertainty. It was a plunge into cold waters; he had to trust that his instincts would guide him. The studio took many hurdles successfully, but just as many questions emerge yet.

Enzo Scavone, senior journalist at The OverPowered Noobs, joined Windy Games to discuss how the nimble studio mastered challenges of yesterday and how they are dealing with the ones of today. The conversation provided an intimate insight into the work and planning of a small development studio — and, more importantly, what we can learn from it.

OPN: WHEN I MET YOU GUYS, WHAT I WAS MOST CURIOUS ABOUT WAS TO KNOW WHAT DROVE YOU TO FOUND A GAME DEVELOPMENT STUDIO AND WHAT CHALLENGES YOU HAD ESTABLISHING YOURSELF.

Michaan: I guess, I wanted to make games since I was little. I want a bit more control than what I'd be able to have if I was working at another studio. The biggest challenge I had in starting up was that I had to start by looking for people. It's pretty hard initially to get people to come on if you're not established already, don't have anything you can

show, or aren't already a name that someone would recognize. It took a little while to find some people. After the first person, we got some stuff made and it became a lot easier to bring on the rest of the team.

THE PROJECT THAT YOU'RE CURRENTLY WORKING ON IS CALLED MIASMA CAVES. TELL US ABOUT THE GAME AND ESPECIALLY HOW DID YOU GET THE IDEA FOR IT?

Miasma Caves is a cave exploration game where you get to go through a procedurally-generated cave system trying to find treasures. All the treasures have some silly lore or backstory which ties into the story of the world. [You collect them] and then you try and return [to the village] to sell them, and then repeat. The different thing for this game is that there is no combat, so all the dangers are environmental. [Running out of] time and just getting lost seems to be a big challenge that we're trying to mitigate a bit more. We're [also] trying to fill the game with life: (such as) the animals and things that make it more interesting, (or) adding a JRPG-feel for the town.

[The idea] came from when I used to play Minecraft for a while. I would go into a hole and just keep running as far as I can, and I wouldn't leave until I found diamonds or something equally as rare and then have to try and get back up. [The concept] got fleshed out with some other games I was playing at the time or just old games I enjoyed.

WHO'S THE MAIN CHARACTER?

The main character is Leseth. She is a treasure hunter for the town. It's a small town, and they rely on the treasure hunters for funds. Like an old-style gold rush type town, a very out-of-the-way one.

WERE THERE BIG MILESTONES TOWARD WHICH YOU WERE WORKING?

We had a couple of big milestones. Our biggest one was just getting the cave system to work and generate. We have a continuous path that we can split and have different kinds of cave sections. There are parts [that resemble] mines, other (parts) where it's a lot more like having a man-made feel to how they're designed and built, and also more natural feeling parts, (like) big caves that go on. Just getting the cave system to build was one of our big milestones — another one was getting the cave-ins to work. The whole cave system is made of Voxels, [and when] the ceiling starts falling, it sets off a chain reaction and has sections of the cave just fall on the player and block a path behind you.

WHAT WAS COMPLICATED ABOUT WORKING WITH VOXELS AND MAKING THESE CAVE-INS?

Most Voxel engines assume you're going to be above ground. A lot of them don't expect

you to do a ton underground. In Minecraft, they limit how far down you can go. It can't go infinitely down because that's how they designed it. A lot of other engines [do that] as well. Getting it to [work] in an underground game instead of an above-ground game seemed to give us some challenges.

TELL US ABOUT THE SOUNDTRACK FOR THE GAME AND HOW YOU CAME TO WORK WITH LEILA "WOOFLE" WILSON [THE COMPOSER].

We wanted the overall feel of an old PS1-era type game. A lot of my influences come from that era of games. The town ended up having a bit of an Aztec theme. So, we want the music to follow that. The music is supposed to add to the seclusion of being in the caves and the mystery of the things you can find. We're pretty heavy on pan flutes on a lot of the parts along with other instruments. We found Leila when we started to look for a composer and were just jumping through SoundCloud and going through related channels with songs that we thought were cool. We made a list of musicians, and I found Leila, I recognized her stuff from another game she's done, Freedom Planet. I reached out to her, and she was willing, and it worked out pretty well.

YOU MENTIONED BEFORE THAT YOU WERE WORKING ON MAKING SOME PARTS OF THE CAVE MAN-MADE AND SOME PARTS NATURAL-LOOKING. ON YOUR WEBSITE, ONE CAN SEE THAT YOU WENT ON AN EXCURSION TO A CAVE. CAN YOU TELL US ABOUT THAT AND ALSO, HOW DID THAT COME TO IMPROVE YOUR WORK ON THE GAME?

We went to Howe Caverns, upstate in New York. A lot of it was to get the idea of what cave systems feel like and what a lot of the natural formations are. We did the tour where we went past the more touristy parts — as you can see in the picture. Those are the suits that we put on so we wouldn't get too dirty. We couldn't get many pictures of that area because it was so much water and moisture in the air that we didn't want to risk our cameras. We got to see how a lot of the natural formations [take shape], which we can try and work in. Once we start adding the effects and more polish we can try and [implement] a feel for how wet and damp and silent it is down there. It was a fun trip.

DEFINITELY A GREAT TEAM BUILDING EXERCISE. A TRICKY ISSUE FOR YOUNG STUDIOS IS MARKETING THEIR GAME. HAVE YOU CONSIDERED HOW YOU WILL GO ABOUT THAT; MAYBE HIRE A PR STUDIO?

We're still working out exactly how. A lot of our initial plans are to go to a lot of conventions and expos, trying to get noticed, get some word of mouth, and talk to the press. We've been using our social media just trying to get as many avenues [as possible] just so that people can see us. Once we get a bit further, we're going to reach out to streamers and YouTubers to see if anyone wants to cover our game because that seems to be a big way if we can get some good coverage. We're still looking at other avenues. I haven't looked too much into a PR agency; we're probably going to have to

check that out soon to see exactly what they can do.

YOU MENTIONED EXHIBITIONS. WHICH ARE YOU PLANNING TO ATTEND AND WHAT DO YOU EXPECT FROM THEM?

Next, we're planning to attend PLAY NYC, which is coming up next month. I'm also looking into MAGfest and PAX South, but those aren't until January, so it's still too early to sign up for them. [We're looking a lot] for feedback. Early feedback is good because it's really our only time we're showing. We got a lot of feedback from people that don't regularly see the game [which allows us to] see what's working and what people are figuring out without us needing to explain everything. We [understand] where we need to polish and make more sense. We give business cards or get [people] on our mailing list. We want to have some metric, so we're making progress [by] being there.

HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE THE INDIE GAMING SCENE IN NEW YORK? WHO DO YOU THINK IS PART OF IT, WHERE ARE YOU LOCATED IN IT, AND HOW ARE YOU CONNECTED TO OTHER STUDIOS?

I think the scene has been getting a lot bigger recently since there is a lot of schools that have game majors located in New York. Also, (events such as) Playcrafting — those are good places for people to meet up regularly. Just getting the community together is helping. We don't have really big studios [as opposed to] a lot of [other] places where all the other indie companies are normally located. Our studio is located a bit outside the city, so we don't get to as many events as we would like, but we get to the big events when we can.

LASTLY, WHAT WORDS OF WISDOM DO YOU HAVE FOR A GROUP OF YOUNG PEOPLE WHO ARE PLANNING TO FOUND A STUDIO. WHAT CHALLENGES MIGHT THEY ENCOUNTER AND HOW WOULD YOU ENCOURAGE THEM?

What I think is important to learn is the business and non-game development stuff that has to get done and knowing, agreeing on who's going to do what and being okay (with that) role for a while. Everyone wants to do the more interesting and fun parts, like make the game or do the development. [However,] if you don't get the other parts done, no one will know about your game. You'll just get into some kind of feature creep if you don't lock down exactly what you want to do, (and instead) let it just keep going.

SO THESE WOULD BE CHALLENGES. ENCOURAGEMENT?

It's always really exciting to be working on your own project. Whenever you achieve a big milestone, any big thing (that's) able to be shown is so exciting(...) actually being able to show what you have been doing to someone else.

I was lucky to speak to Alex Ahlberg, one of the programmers.

HOW DID YOU GET TO WORK WITH ADAM (MICHAAN)?

Ahlberg: I went to school at Becker College for programming and game design. I feel very fortunate. Right out of school, I started looking, and I actually found Adam on the Unity message boards. Pretty quickly, I went to work here like maybe two or three months after graduating

WHAT ARE YOUR TASKS AS A PROGRAMMER?

I've dealt with items in the games, and I help make the Voxels fall. The Voxels have a stickiness setting, and once that breaks a threshold we need those Voxels to fall, and then, when you dig, you get smash damage. I've worked on a lot of the mechanics of the game.

Next was Emily Compton, the artist.

EMILY, WHAT'S YOUR ROLE AT WINDY GAMES?

Compton: I'm pretty much the artist. We hire some freelancers for a lot of the 2D art assets because there [are] a bunch of icons and there are so many treasures. If I did all the illustrations for each one of the treasures, that would be pretty much a big bulk of my work, so we looked into hiring a few freelance artists as well.

HOW DID YOU REACH OUT AND HOW WAS THAT PROCESS LIKE?

(We used) a lot of art websites, like Behance, and there [are] a ton, like ArtStation, where people will just post their portfolios and have their contact information. In my spare time, I'm often trailing portfolios thinking: uh, this person's got really good style. We found two artists: one of them is in Russia, and the other one is in Chicago, and they've been really good.

ON WHAT HAVE YOU BEEN WORKING?

I'm a full-stack artist. I do some of the concepting all the way to final animation and asset integration. Right now, I'm working on some rigging assignments, because we're doing a first-person camera and I need to have the hands going out to the pickaxe and stuff like that. This week is rigging and environment art and I have to finish the town-architecture, too.

I was also able to talk to Tom Brooks II, the other programmer on the team.

HI, TOMMY!

Brooks: Hi, my name is Tommy, I like long walks on virtual beaches and [unintelligible].

HIL-ARIOUS. HOW DID YOU COME TO WORK IN PROGRAMMING AND SPECIALIZE ON SHADERS?

It's something I've always wanted to do, and that's one of the things I like most about working here. As a programmer, I have a ton of freedom. We're very focused on making our demos, our core feature set and actually making the game very fun and enjoyable. We also get the opportunity as programmers to explore a lot and see where our individual work passion lies. We can put a lot of ourselves into our game as a consequence of that. So, while it's something I have always been interested in, specifically in this job that's when it has been able to manifest.

AND WHICH BEACH ARE YOU TAKING THE WALK ON?

Blood Shore in Final Fantasy XIV.

Windy Games, thank you for the interview. The in-depth look into the workings of a young game development studio was enlightening. See you guys at PLAY NYC!