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Why Microsoft Game Studios is breaking into Europe – and what it means for you

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WHY PLAY BY THE RULES?



1: NO SWIMMING WITH SHARKS

The art of the matter

A look at the soon indispensable role of art outsourcing will have within the development framework...



Though it may seem astonishing to think it now, Leonardo da Vinci and the majority of his Renaissance contemporaries were far from revered during their time. In fact, most operated from workshops on a work-for-hire basis. Artists were, in effect, little more than today's equivalent of decorators – albeit the kind that were asked to cover walls with something a little more intricate, a little more colourful than just a quick splash of plain magnolia emulsion.

As their fame (relatively speaking) and workload increased, it wasn't unusual to see some of the labour distributed amongst apprentices, with the master focusing his efforts on just the key components of a commission.

The clients didn't mind, provided the quality wasn't compromised. Just as gamers

“Outsourcing is crucial for streamlining the whole development process...”

Donn M Garton, Alive

these days don't care whether you got your tree models done in-house or by a team in Shanghai or Sydney, provided the foliage effect is accomplished and integrates artistically with the remainder of the game assets.

Like other areas of development, art outsourcing has

become an increasingly common avenue as game productions become more and more ambitious. In fact, of all the outsourcing sectors, it's arguably the one that's evolved the fastest.

“The industry has realised that outsourcing is not just an option to save some costs, it's crucial for survival and for streamlining the whole development process,” says Donn M Garton, business development director at Alive Interactive Media, an art outsourcing operation based in Vietnam.

The evolution is most evident in the change of attitude from the commissioning studios and their dedication to the practice. A long running partner of Alive's is EA, which even with the biggest in-house development resource on the planet is “beginning to take a more holistic, integrative and

visionary approach to the outsourcing model,” says Garton.

ORGANISED ARTISTRY

Developers are also getting more organised as well, and many publishers with large development teams have now formalised their approach to outsourcing with dedicated departments or personnel. A few years ago it would be uncommon to have a commissioning developer to deliver their brief with guidelines and a style book – now it's almost par for the course (almost – many of the companies *Develop* spoke to said there was always room for improvement when it came to dealing with an outsourcing client).

The overall change isn't exactly surprising. As productions increase in complexity, the likelihood of every area of the work being carried out in-house decreases.

Above: Full service animation studio RealTime UK has formed a close association with games clients, having worked on a number of big name titles including Colin McRae DIRT



Above: As hardware demands increase, so too do those of studios, who now need professional solutions to conundrums posed by the likes of facial animation

But it's important to realise it's no longer simply elements such as asset generation typically associated with art outsourcing that are handed over to a new team, says Tony Prosser. As MD of RealtimeUK, which specialises in X-Movies (visual bar/theme-setting sequences, rather than anything spicier), intro sequences, teaser trailers and televisual style ads, Prosser has seen a significant change in the industry.

"There has been an explosion in this sector of the business within the last two to three years as publishing and development partners have realised the need for X-Movies. With the main focus from the serious players now being 100 per cent on next-gen titles and projects, and with budgets ranging from £10 to £20 million, the publisher needs the developer to concentrate their efforts on developing the games, whilst someone like ourselves works in parallel to produce those component parts of the marketing campaign well in advance of the launch." The change is such, says Prosser, that it's not uncommon for his company to now work on animation sequences months before the title is even at a stage to be shown to the trade or press, hence the logic in contracting a specialist to handle that side of the equation.

But even specialists are finding their work is diversifying in order to keep up with demand. Axis, a full-service animation studio also catering for the broadcast and

commercial industries, has since 2000 formed a close association with video game clients. With recent projects such *Colin McRae DIRT*, *Thrillville* and *Sega Rally*, the company has a history of X-Movies and TV commercials but it has felt the effect of the arrival of latest hardware, with an increasing number of requests for the

"There's definitely an element of creative input in outsourcing..."

Nick Perrett, Image Metrics

creation of next-gen assets, especially character.

"Developers are really discovering that creating high-resolution assets takes a lot of time and artistic skill and as we have been working at high resolution for over ten years with our CGI pipeline, we are already up to speed with the latest creative and technical skills," says Axis' executive producer Richard Scott.

CREATIVE SOURCE

At the same time, developers are now regularly using their art partners as more than just a resource – they are a sounding board and source of knowledge.

"There's definitely an element of creative input when it comes to art outsourcing – much of it tends to be technically driven, however," explains Nick Perrett, VP of business development at facial animation company Image Metrics. "When it comes to next-gen assets the thing that matters is getting the most out of them – so lighting models and making sure everything you've made works and looks right during run-time, these are the key things we get asked about."

It doesn't stop there, though. "The other thing that is interesting is that we are being asked to contribute creative ideas on how the game could look. This doesn't happen on every project but some clients have asked for our input on graphic look, render style and techniques," notes Scott, as a possible further indication that attitudes to outsourcing are changing.

But so is the art outsourcing landscape itself, with a considerable influx of firms offering their services. This, however, has not meant a better availability of skillset, warns Paul Chamberlain, MD of The Project Zoo. "More and more companies need to outsource artwork for their projects as product development becomes more and more complex on each platform, but we are finding that most experienced development studios rather opt to use a more experienced outsourcing outfit rather than the cheaper alternatives as they can often lead to a much more complicated method of working."

Interestingly, technical issues aren't always the trickiest aspect art outsourcers face – often getting developers to understand both their working practices (see *boxout 1 for a taster*) and the outsourcing process clearly. "Developers often see outsourcers as purely a cheap service but don't think through the practicalities and processes that we have to go through," laments Chamberlain. "The biggest problem we have is getting clear and concise guidance from our clients on every aspect of what they require us to do, this in turn means we end up reworking assets when the specifications were not clear enough in the first place which causes problems."

Chamberlain is quick to concede some developers are perfectly au fait with the process and understand the outsourcer is effectively an addition to the team, requiring the same level of involvement and attention as an in-house team.

This understanding extends to timescales. Prosser is quick to

COSTS

So, you understand the process and have decided art outsourcing is for you. But you're not sure if your budget will make it? While it seems logical to assume prices in the sector are rising as processes and demands become increasingly sophisticated, the good news is that this is not necessarily the case – and all art outsourcing companies still argue that it can significantly reduce the cost of development.

"Just ask the manufacturing industry who learned this lesson decades ago," says Donn Garton of Alive. "A quality outsourcing partner provides at least a 30 to 40 per cent reduction in total development costs as soon as you start using them. Then, when you consider the in-house costs of downtime, hiring, firing, insurance, infrastructure and other overhead costs, the savings increase even more. By outsourcing production, the developer essentially has resources 'on demand' that they can easily turn on or off depending on workflow. The savings to a developer goes far beyond a simple lower hourly rate for an artist."

But at the same time, while cost is the number one factor for outsourcing, the quality of labour is becoming key, meaning that careful shopping around is crucial.

"I think it is production values that drive the level of costs related to art outsourcing. I don't think that necessarily means prices are rising but everyone needs to be realistic," offers Richard Scott of Axis Animation. "If you want the best production values that can compete with the feature film and television industry then there are higher associated costs for that than the previous generation of video games."

single out overtime as the biggest headache his team faces.

"If a developer or publisher is new to outsourcing animation," he says, "they often don't leave enough time for us to do our job properly without serious crunch time – HD next-gen movies can require up to four months if we're going to work with the developer to design an animation that meets all their needs."

But, equally, there is also a responsibility on the part of the

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outsourcer to meet the developer halfway, argues Scott.

"I think the trickiest part of what we do is getting inside the developers' heads and really understanding their project and its requirements quickly. Developers are always very close to their projects and could have spent years developing the ideas behind their title; they know the whole thing inside out and as a partner and collaborator you need to get on their level really quickly and then work out how to bring something extra to the table."

Ultimately, the above issues mostly revolve around communication.

Explains Alive's Garton: "It is one thing for us to get photo reference for a '67 Chevy and then model it. We can do it efficiently and at the highest level of quality. But, when someone sends us a one page brief for a '70s blaxploitation era pimp', it may take us a few more feedback loops than normal to get exactly what the client is looking for. In the near future outsource companies will need to distinguish themselves by being able to handle the more creative, more subjective aspects of development."

Of course, as studios begin to increasingly rely on art outsourcing, problems such as those mentioned above should rapidly diminish. And

there is no doubt that, going forward, many if not all studios will have to consider outsourcing their graphical assets given the complexity of future projects.

"Our customers have experienced that it is getting harder and inefficient to cover the entire art production in-house," confirms Thomas Schleisnitz, MD of Rabcat, which has previously worked on *MotorStorm* and *GTA Vice City*. "Even very large studios are facing difficulties when trying to handle massive production peaks in-house. Many large development studios

"It is getting inefficient to cover the entire art production in-house..."

Thomas Schleisnitz, Rabcat

are already aware of this critical aspect and most of them are preparing or are ready to switch to professional art outsourcing in the near future."

And it's not just the big boys. "Many smaller developers are having to outsource as their publishers are expecting incredibly high graphical content in smaller

and smaller timescales, which smaller developers just cannot accomplish purely from a financial perspective," says Project Zoo's Chamberlain, adding that obviously there's a financial benefit for larger outfits in that the outsourcer is employed on a temporary basis, removing the pressure of quickly finding another project for that team of individuals rather than have them sat around twiddling their crayons.

INTERNATIONAL CONNECTION

"Quite a few of our publisher partners are outsourcing to the Far East, such as Korea and China. The quality and the management processes there are now sufficient enough so that spending money on outsourcing makes sense," adds Image Metrics' Perrett, pointing out that this itself has helped legitimise external art production, helping new and smaller independents understand that outsourcing has its benefits in encouraging collaboration with third parties.

"There definitely was a tipping point behind developer's perceptions of art outsourcing. For us, in 2003, we only had one game with our work in it. Now, with 20-odd titles people pay attention straight away – and there is an assumption that you know games and know what is needed."

Which leads us to how the outsourcing sector – as it's destined

to become an integrated part of the development process – is likely to establish itself, going forward.

"I am a firm believer that in some form the much talked about 'feature film model' will be the right way forward for development teams and outsourcers," offers Scott. "I'd like to think that the phrase 'outsourcer' would actually become redundant because it would be natural for developers and publishers to call on the skills of certain partners at the right time during the production process."

One obvious benefit Scott sees in this collaborative model is the ability for people from outside the game industry to bring with them fresh ideas and creative solutions.

It's certainly a direction the industry appears to be heading towards – although at the same time this newfound concerted integration is unlikely to come at the cost of certain firmly established principles. It's safe to say that studios themselves will always maintain a core team as a guiding force for a game and its creative and artistic vision.

Which effectively means outsourcers are unlikely to ever reach da Vinci-levels (posthumous or otherwise) of recognition, but perhaps the dynamic will prove at least as harmonious as that of being one of his apprentices. At the very least, it'll be just as important.

ART OUTSOURCING: BEST PRACTICES

Alive Interactive Media's Donn M. Garton talks through the key points for perfect outsourcing...

Check references thoroughly and verify IP security.

Pay attention to the examples of other client's work that they send to you. Are they sending you a mesh to prove their skill level that may violate a previous client's NDA? If they are, you can be sure that they will do the same with your (unreleased) IP in the future. Beware.

Initiate a pilot with the studio after checking references.

Make clear to them your benchmark and your expectations at the beginning. Don't let them 'figure out' what you want. It's a waste of everyone's time and money. Pilots take a bit of time and may cost a bit but it is well worth it in the long run. For us a pilot is crucial because it gives the client a clear idea of our process and skill level, while allowing us to see how organised the client is, how tight

their team is and how quickly they provide feedback. Both the client and our team has benefited immensely from the potential landmines we've discovered during the pilot process.

Price is secondary.

In outsourcing as with anything else, you get what you pay for. Customer service, international grade infrastructure, security, a person on the other end who can clearly speak your language, all are essential for getting the most out of your outsourcing vendor and are worth paying the extra dollar or two.

Size isn't everything.

Mega vendors with 500+ artists onsite definitely may have the scale to churn through your project, but they also may not deliver the type of detailed care and attention your assets may require. Smaller studios with a quality track record are more

likely to be able to give the personal attention and quality you need. Large scale operations work for call centers and sneaker factories but not always for next gen production as some developers have discovered to their dismay.

Make sure that they are not 'outsourcing' to other studios behind your back.

Many studios say they have the capacity to get the job, but in fact they're sending whatever they can't handle to a secondary vendor who you have no idea about and who may have no IP security to speak of. Make sure if they know if they do this without your permission, they will lose you as a client and never get you back.

Send the tightest brief and reference you can muster until you learn the skill level and resources of your vendor.

To paraphrase Jerry McGuire, "Help us, help you."

Preparation on the side of the developer is an often overlooked aspect of the outsourcing process.

The less wiggle room you allow a vendor, the fewer hurdles you'll encounter and the faster you'll get to where you want to be.

Get in there. Visit the studio, get to know the team leads, see their process and culture.

If you are serious about your vendor and they are serious about you, nothing will help contribute to your peace of mind and enhance the team's dedication to your projects like a once or twice a year on-site visit.

We've had great success in the past when clients have come to VN.

On site training and even brief face to face interaction with your vendor is invaluable.