

# INDEPENDENTS' DAY

The Community Games initiative brings XNA-powered indie creators out of their garages and onto the global stage. Meet the game-design stars of tomorrow...by playing their games today!



■ Xerxes' insane Weapon of Choice? A jet engine. This pretty much sums up the game's attitude.

## Weapon of Choice MAUL IN THE FAMILY



■ Nathan Fouts (left) worked on several *Ratchet & Clank* games before forming MBG with his wife, Amy (right).

"Many games have their more interesting gameplay features focus-tested out of them," says Nathan Fouts, president and programmer of Indiana-based Mommy's Best Games. "We think gamers are smarter than that."

The proof: *Weapon of Choice*, a ridiculously energetic run-and-gunner in the spirit of classics like *Contra*, *Metal Warriors*, and *Rocket Knight Adventures* — what Fouts calls "old-school style with a new, modern twist." That modern twist includes unusual gear and techniques like the Spiderpack, the Vengeance Missile, alt-fire weapons, and moments of slo-mo crisis called Death-Brushing, but also the way the plot unfolds. "The primary story concerns the world's policing body trying to stop invading aliens," explains Fouts. "But things quickly turn strange when the aliens themselves try to get you to side with them and abandon the government. There's also a rogue human organization trying to convince you they know what to do. In the end, the player can try out all the paths to reveal the complete story and four different endings."

The story, by AJ Johnson, is one of the few things the company outsourced. "Mommy's Best Games is essentially a two-person operation: me and my wife, Amy," says Fouts. "I do the game concept, design, art, animation, programming, and sound effects. Amy is producer, business manager, marketing director, CFO, public relations, and cheerleader." A talented group of friends

Words by Dan Amrich



■ You'll want to learn the controls properly: *Weapon of Choice* features an atypical layout and some surprise attacks.



■ "From a content standpoint, Microsoft has shown they're not afraid when indie developers let their freak flags fly," says Fouts.

(including some veterans of Insomniac Games, Nathan's previous employer) chipped in to help, but the bulk of work comes down to the dynamic duo.

If you're used to the conventions of the go-right genre, you'll love *Weapon of Choice's* novel new ideas, like using one of the Spiderpack's robotic arms to wield your machine gun or immolating alien foes with a fire-belching jet engine. "I was having so much fun designing the game, I didn't stop to see what I'd created until about four months into real development," admits Fouts. "When we looked at the scope of what I had designed, there were 45 levels, 30 characters with their own unique Weapon of Choice, and 11 different endings. That was a little grandiose for one man to do."

*Weapon of Choice* took third place in this year's Dream-Build-Play competition, and its creators can't wait to unleash...um, share it. "The world needs more hugs and love," says Fouts, "And if there's anything this game does well, it hugs you, ever so tightly, with giant slimy tentacles...of love."

■ Despite what this photo suggests, Amy (left) and Nathan of Mommy's Best Games really are going places.



## Word Soup COOKING UP AN ADDICTION



■ Scott Newby was presumably behind the camera for this snapshot of his Fuzzy Bug partners, Scott Campbell (left) and Teoman Irmak.

If there's one Community Game that received legitimate pre-release buzz, it was *Word Soup* — mostly because everybody who tried the word-search work-in-progress admitted that they couldn't stop playing it. "The hardcore literati niche isn't a big audience," suggests Scott Newby, one of the three men who make up Britain-based Fuzzy Bug Interactive. "*Word Soup* is completely open to players of all standards. You don't need to be the reigning *Scrabble* World Champion to enjoy playing our game."

Like the best games, *Word Soup's* setup is streamlined and simple: Faced with a giant grid of letters and a five-minute time limit, players connect horizontally, vertically, and diagonally adjacent letters to spell words. Longer words and uncommon letters score bigger points; using tricky tiles like Z and Q buys you bonus time. It sounds simple. It is simple. The hard part is resisting the urge to say "one more game." And while you can't log on to Live to find real-time opponents, you'll likely find them in your own living room. "It's ostensibly a single-player game, but it does work incredibly well when you have a few people crowded round, all shouting and pointing at the TV," says Newby. "That's the multiplayer mode."

As a Community Game, *Word Soup* should be able to succeed on its own merits, not to mention the positive word-of-mouth that the game has already generated. And, of course, light competition never hurts. "I don't feel like we're going into a crowded word-game market," Newby says dryly. "Are there really any good console word games? Once we've launched *Word Soup*, maybe the world won't need another."



■ "It's very easy to want to put lots of eye candy in there," admits Newby, noting the 360's graphical power. "With a word game, it would just distract the player more than anything."



■ "The first draft on PC actually had the tiles fall upward," reveals Newby. "That was changed very quickly."

It's sadistic fun to torture Slinky.



■ Tricks like multiple flips and long-distance shots are rewarded with Achievements.



■ The planned cutscenes and story elements of *CarneyVale: Showtime* were trimmed so the team could polish other portions instead.



■ That's a big check! *CarneyVale* team leader Bruce Chia (third from left) accepts Team GAMBIT's prize.



■ "*CarneyVale* is like a city made entirely out of carnivals and circus people such as clowns, acrobats, and bouncing bunnies," says Chia.



■ Chia got to demonstrate the game for the press in Singapore after the team's big win.



■ The level editor really shows an extra level of forethought and dedication.

## CarneyVale: Showtime

### STEP RIGHT UP OR FALL HILARIOUSLY DOWN



■ As team leader, Bruce Chia talks to the press, but he stresses that *CarneyVale* was a true group effort.

*CarneyVale: Showtime* is a sequel to a game you'll probably never play. Last year, students at the MIT-backed GAMBIT game lab in Singapore created a circus-themed PC game in Flash, where players trained circus animals by whipping a Wii remote. Rather than port the cheekily named *CarneyVale: Wiip* over to 360 for this year's DBP contest, the team kept

the circus theme and created a brand-new game in the same world, this time based on acrobatics.

"We were definitely inspired by pinball," says Bruce Chia, leader of Team GAMBIT. "In an early prototype, we wanted to allow the player to crash through the entire level, bouncing around as he went along like a pinball. However, there were some design flaws with that." Instead, players fling an acrobat named Slinky skyward, tossing the hapless ragdoll with a series of mechanical arms, bouncing him into destructible obstacles, and executing daring flips that might execute Slinky himself. Explore the space, go for speed runs, try to pull off daring tricks — but eventually, send Slinky through the ring of fire to end the level. When you've mastered all the game's challenges, build your own with the included level editor.

While a seven-person team worked for four months on the game, the only constant in the game's design was change. "We shifted quite far from the original design in the end," describes Chia, noting that *Burnout Paradise's* crash mode was a strong early influence. Peer reviews refined it further while drawing more inspiration from *N+*, *Sonic the Hedgehog*, *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater*, and *Super Mario Galaxy*, among many others.

After many prototypes and plenty of feedback, the final version of *CarneyVale: Showtime* took home first prize in the 2008 Dream-Build-Play competition, and for good reason. The "vertical ragdoll platform" gameplay feels fresh and novel; the learning curve hits the perfect balance point between engaging challenge and a sense of mastery; and the brightly colored big-top world appeals to the kid lurking inside even the most serious *Gears of War 2* player. Plus, it's sadistic fun to effectively torture Slinky.

Team GAMBIT received \$40,000 for its Dream-Build-Play 2008 victory, and the details of a publishing contract are being worked out now. It's a sweet success for the young team. "We consist mostly of students or fresh graduates who are very new to the games industry and have only our books and games that we play to refer to," explains Chia. "We developed it very much in the independent spirit: with our passion for games."

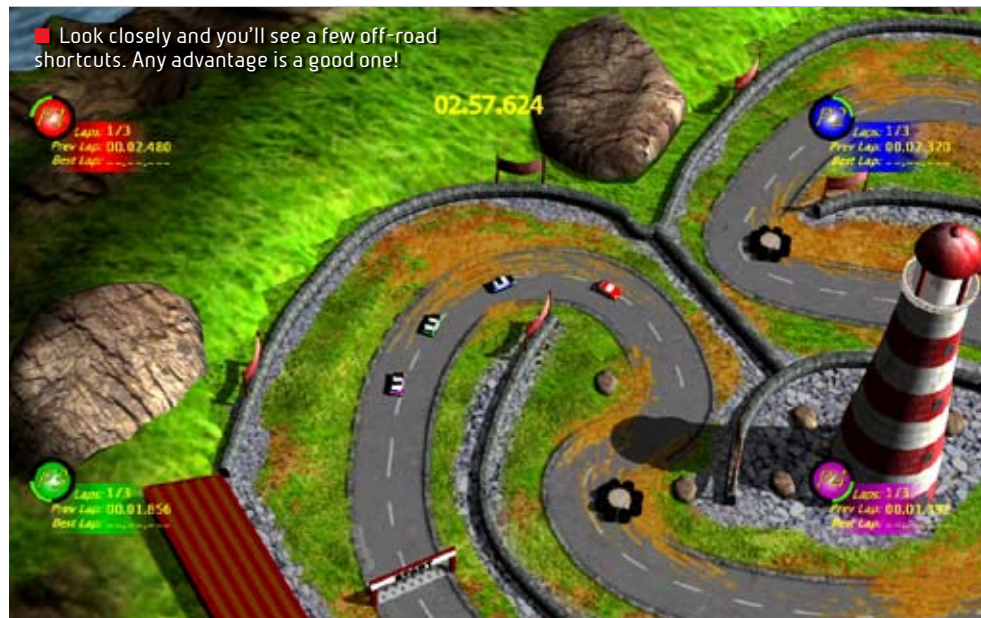
“Doing everything yourself is a challenge and can be a pain.”



■ The version of *OTT* we tried featured only two tracks, but they were fun, and they supported four-player racing.



■ The influence of *Off-Road* is evident — and welcome in the genre.



■ Look closely and you'll see a few off-road shortcuts. Any advantage is a good one!

## Over the Top Racing

### THE ONE-MAN, FOUR-MONTH BRITISH ROAD RALLY



■ Malcolm Hodge build *OTT* for 360 because of the console's power, but "running my own creations on my HDTV is cool, too."

"All my programming knowledge is self-taught," admits *Over the Top Racing* creator Malcolm Hodge, adding, "I'm not that great at it." But after trying an early version of *OTT*, we disagree: the four-player, top-down arcade racer recalls coin-op hits like *Ironman Ivan Stewart's Super Off-Road* and *Super Sprint* in the nicest ways — and it's a genre currently underrepresented on Xbox 360.

What's more, you'd certainly never guess *OTT* was the first official release of a lifelong hobbyist programmer who has done time as a baker and a postal worker while raising a family. "A lot of the time creating *OTT* was spent learning and experimenting," says the 34-year-old Londoner. "I didn't have a set idea apart from wanting to do an overhead racer. I was a big fan of *Off-Road* and *Supercars* from my Amiga days. I also wanted to do something in 3D for the first time in my life, just to overcome that challenge."

It's a challenge he overcame in just four months. "I kinda gave up playing games for that period and put everything I could into the project," he recalls. "I mainly wanted to have something worthwhile to enter in the Dream-Build-Play 2008 Competition. Even though I didn't think I had a chance of winning, I just wanted to be part of it." Ultimately, *OTT* was a solo effort out of necessity. "I wish I did have a team of friends to work with, but the fact is, I don't know anyone who can use a 3D package, or do programming, or even use a 2D paint package that well," says Hodge. "So I just set about doing everything myself. Doing everything is a challenge and can be a pain. I would love to be able to just concentrate on doing one thing and doing it right."

Hodge is the first to admit that "there are still features, bug fixes, and likely more tracks needed" for him to be truly satisfied with *OTT*, but the game is even more impressive when you consider that Hodge has never finished building a game before, let alone released one to the public. What's more, Malcolm's mind is moving on. "I have already started creating something new," he says, "but I'm going to take more time on this one and make sure I give myself time to play all the great games that have just come out." Hey — he's got four months of catching up to do. ●