Game On!
an industry op-ed by Steve Wright

Your next VFX job just might be a game

If you want to do world class visual effects then the only place to be is in feature films, right? Not any more. Video games are rapidly stepping up the quality and complexity of their visual effects simply because it makes them a lot of money. We all know that "*Deathly Hollows part 2*" is the current record holder for fastest selling film at the box office at $169 million its first weekend. You may not know that Harry Potter was crushed like a bug by the release of "*Call of Duty: Modern Warfare"* (Activision) just this last November with sales of $750 million its first 5 days.

In the early days of video games the digital artists all dreamed of making it into the big time - feature films. Many did. I did. Today, however, the trend has reversed. Video game companies now routinely hire feature film visual effects artists and vfx supervisors. At a time in our industry when visual effects are under assault by both a feeble economy and offshore cost advantages, the video game industry could be a whole new venue for your talents.

$Billions and $Billions

Visual effects are expensive, but the video game industry can certainly afford them. The global video game market is estimated at $56 Billion, which is twice the recorded music industry and nearly 60% of the feature film industry, including DVD sales. PricewaterhouseCoopers predicts video games to be worth an astonishing $82 Billion by 2015. The video game companies have money and they are spending it on visual effects. They have even been at the forefront of technology development such as motion capture.

The stunning rise of video game visual effects was driven home to me just a couple weeks ago while I was judging nominees for the Visual Effects Society's 10th annual VES Awards. There is now an official category "Outstanding Visual Effects in an Animated Commercial or Video Game Trailer" that had several submissions. The VES is struggling to figure out how to bring video game visual effects into the fold as it is a completely new venue but at the same time rapidly rising in importance to the visual effects industry. We can be sure of seeing more VES video game awards categories' in the near future.

I actually worked at Atari for 6 years in the 80's during Space Invaders, Asteroids, and Missile Command - what we used to call "twitch games" - for the rapid fire responses needed to play. In those days the big new thing was to port successful arcade games to the home video game market for the Atari 2600 game console. The next big thing was creating video games from features films, the most notorious example being the E.T. game. Today, video games are being made into movies!

Hit Games for the Big Screen

Just a few of the video game titles that have made it to the big screen would include *Super Mario Bros.* (1993), *Mortal Kombat* (1995), *Lara Kroft: Tomb Raider* (2001), *Resident Evil* (2004) and the blockbuster *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time* (2010). Some 30 video games have been made into feature films (not counting Japanese films) and there are currently over 20 video game based features in various stages of planning and pre-production. These would include *Call of Duty* (Activision), *Halo* (Microsoft), *Dead Space 2* (Visceral Games), and the fifth *Resident Evil* (CapCom). The last Resident Evil was panned by critics but praised by movie-goers to the tune of nearly $300 million world wide.

I personally witnessed the extension of a video game company into feature films when I did Nuke training for Ubisoft (*Assassins Creed, Prince of Persia, Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon*, etc. etc.). Ubisoft is a huge French video game developer (ranked 21ˢᵗ on the list of largest software companies in the world) with offices around the world. I went to their Montreal office where 1700 programmers work and trained up their nascent Ubisoft Motion Picture division chartered to turn Ubisoft games into features. I am even now in discussions for Nuke training at yet another big gaming company. This is an upward trend.

Coming Soon – *Asteroids!*

There are even plans in the works to adapt two 8-bit classics to the big screen – *Asteroids* and *Missile Command* (Atari). Bereft of story and lacking character development, I am certain that the Hollywood gift for fine filmmaking will turn both of these classic video games into movie greats.

So, if you are a talented visual effects artist looking for his (or her) next gig and finding the pickings are slim, think about video games. They do fine work and have lots of money. And the jobs go where the money is.
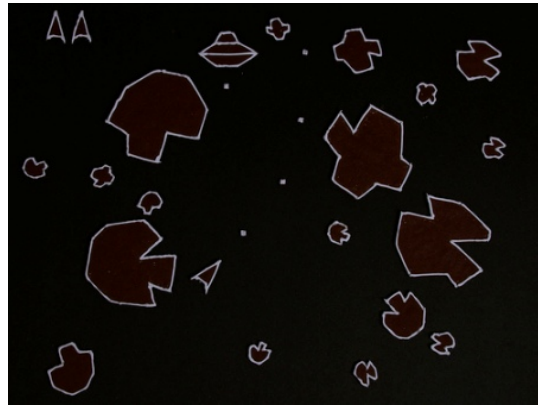
The Next Blockbuster?

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