

A career that hits the heights

Jason Avent, a hugely successful games director, gives **ANNE GIACOMANTONIO** some tips from the top on how to get ahead in gaming



Blackrock Studio's latest title, *Pure*, is exactly that: a pure, adrenaline-fuelled, all-terrain vehicle bonanza. It took approximately 20 months to complete and game director Jason Avent (pictured above) was there from the beginning. In his 12-year career – a relatively long time in this young industry – *Pure* has been his favourite game to work on. During his career he has worked on many different types of formats: Formula One, rally and super bikes, MotoGP, role-playing games and an action-adventure game. Having switched careers from civil engineering to get into the games industry, Avent is well placed to talk about the challenges of the industry – not to mention getting into it in the first place

What were the first games you played as a child? I think what really got me excited as a kid was arcades – seeing and hearing games such as *Space Invaders* and *Pac Man* – while my first home experience was a tennis game from a company called Binatone.

How did you go from 'Pac Man' to Blackrock via civil engineering?

I liked the idea of making stuff and I have studied a lot of science and maths. I chose civil engineering because I would be able to get a job in it, and it also gives you a really good, rounded education. When you are choosing your degree you are 18 and you haven't got a clue as to what you are going to do in three years' time, so I wanted to keep my options as open as possible.

The pinnacle of my experience in civil engineering was watching a JCB digger while stood in the rain with water filling up my wellies! I decided there and then that I wasn't going to do the job forever.

Did you have to retrain to get into the games industry?

I did my training on the job, but the industry has changed a lot now and it is much more competitive. To give yourself the best chance of success I think it's best to do a degree in a core subject such as maths, physics or engineering. You have to study something that is really hard and challenges you in a



very traditional way, so that if you don't happen to make it into video games you can do something else.

How does a title such as 'Pure' come together?

First there is the prototype phase, where you try to identify what will be the most

important parts of the game and then put them together. Once you have done that you move into the pre-production phase, which is when you produce all the tools you need to make the game. Then you do what's called a "vertical slice", where you test all the different aspects of the game to get

them to a point where they look and play similarly to the final, quality product. On *Pure* that meant all sorts of different things – testing massive jumps and beautiful views, as well as checking 80 per cent of the visual quality of the game and playing a trick race.

Then you go into mass production where you produce all the levels, bikes, riders and assets. In the final stages you fix bugs, polish and balance the game and do usability testing, which is where you get members of the public to play the game. Then you submit the finished product to the format holders of Sony and Microsoft, and as long as they are happy to have your game on their platform and nothing needs fixing you go into manufacture and distribution. The whole process will usually take between 18 months and two years.

What is your favourite stage of the production process?

When all the elements of the game that you helped to conceive start to come together. It's a point in the project that's a bit like Christmas morning – you've got new cool stuff in the game that you can get excited about!

Producing a game will usually take between 18 months and two years

We also get to travel to several places, such as Octotillo Wells and Glamis Dunes in California, Baja in Mexico – and Crawley in West Sussex! There's a farm up in Crawley where they have lots of vehicles, including quad bikes and some ramps.

How can a graduate find a job in this competitive industry?

The entry-level positions at a game developer are in design, art and programming. Testing – known as quality assurance – used to be a useful route in but there are now a lot of people who can do games testing and you don't need that many, so we tend to only go for experienced people.

With design, art and programming, we want people that can draw and are naturally artistic, although you are trained on how the packages work and how the video games are made. Essentially, once you are in the industry you can stay in, but getting in is the real challenge.