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AMBRIDGE is one of the biggest game developer hubs in the UK, with two of the largest independently-owned studios - Frontier (producers of *Elite: Dangerous*) and Jagex (*Runescape*) - based in the city. It also sports two other major studios: Ninja Theory (*Enslaved: Odyssey to the West*) and Guerilla Cambridge (formerly SCE Cambridge), plus a thriving indie scene renowned for producing titles such as *Lone Survivor*, *Super Hexagon*, *Chompy Chomp Chomp*, *Prison Architect* and many more.

As a significant player in the global game development scene you would expect to find a few at the annual Develop conference in Brighton recently. Indeed both Frontier and Jagex had speakers at the conference. So here's a flavour of what's going on in this very creative sector at the current time:

David Braben, CEO of Frontier had a talk on 'Redefining Alpha' - a look at how their project to revitalise the *Elite* brand without the traditional publisher route has been a great experience for them and how being under constant public scrutiny has affected the development.

Frontier recently released *Elite: Dangerous* a revival of the 'Elite' gaming brand some 30 years after the first game saw huge success on the BBC Micro in 1984. The project to revitalise *Elite* was entirely crowdfunded, with £1,578,316 raised through 25,681 fan-contributed funds.

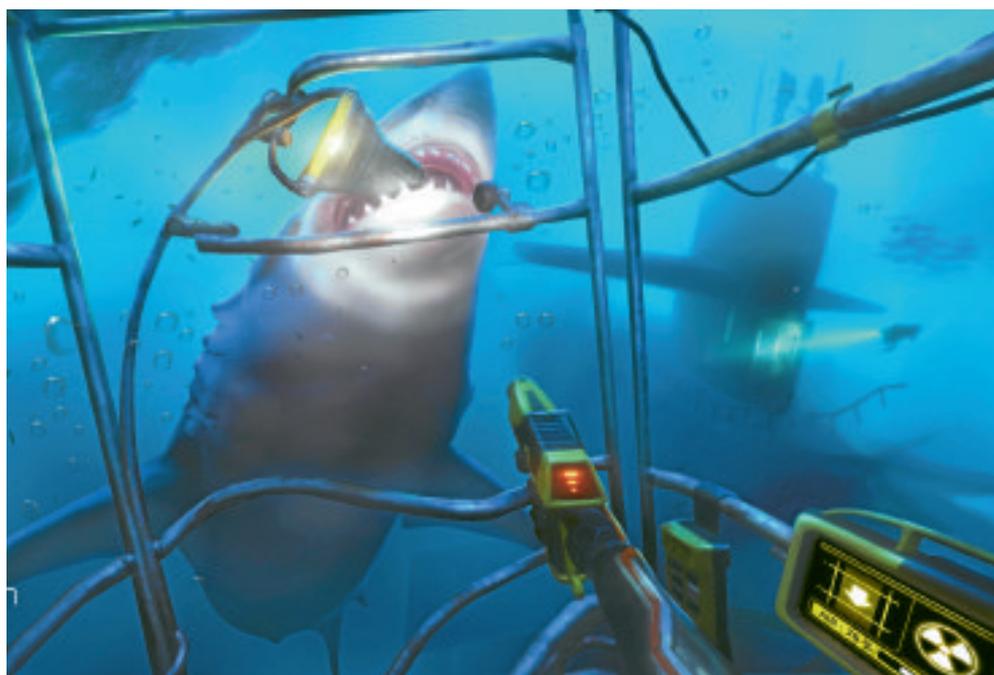
It's the biggest game crowdfunding success in the UK. Frontier is also famous for developing the *Roller Coaster Tycoon* series of games, Mobile and WiiWare hit *Lost Winds* and for having a close relationship with Microsoft, for whom it developed Kinect titles.

Frontier's Kickstarter campaign also offered a novel

Our man in the know, **PJ Belcher**, caught up with Cambridge's secretive gaming community at the Develop conference in Brighton



Project Morpheus: The Deep



incentive for fans to pledge £4,500 for the rights to produce a novel set in the *Elite: Dangerous* universe, with considerations given for things such as character and location names so that the fiction can be supported by the game.

This saw some backers initiate their own Kickstarter campaigns to raise the funds so they could, in turn, back *Elite: Dangerous* and write their novel. This was firstly and perhaps most famously done by Drew Wager, who raised his own £7,043 from 435 backers to make his >

Developing greatness

>> pledge to Elite and cover costs of his own publishing.

One publisher, Gollancz, snapped up three of novels and as of May this year they have been available as e-books. The three titles *Elite: Wanted*, *Elite: Nemorensis* and *Elite: Docking is Difficult* were written by selected authors Gavin Deas, Simon Spurrier and Gideon Defoe respectively, each seasoned authors with their own unique style of writing which shows in the (very entertaining) work.

Executive producer of *Runescape* Phil Mansell from Jagex had a talk on 'Player Driven Development'. As the world's biggest free online multiplayer game (with more than 200 million accounts) Phil has first-hand experience of the importance of using player feedback and behaviour to improve the service. The company attracted great controversy after it removed some gaming features in 2007 to "help balance the experience".

This resulted in an unconfirmed loss of accounts, but a referendum held in 2010 asking whether these features should be restored attracted an amazing 1.2 million votes, with 91 per cent in favour of the proposal. That's democracy, folks!

Runescape still remains a huge success 13 years after it was launched. Jagex is currently working on the world's first Transformers-branded MMORPG (massive multiplayer online role playing game), called *Transformers Universe* - already three years in the making.

There's been a thriving indie scene in Cambridge since the computer games era began. At Develop I bumped into XBLIG (Xbox Live Indie Games) hit, *Chompy Chomp Chomp* developers Utopian World of Sandwiches. A husband-and-wife team, Woody and Sarah, are living the indie dream.

"We go to Develop every year because it's probably the best conference in the UK to network with other game developers, publishers, platform holders, press and all other aspects of the industry," says Woody.

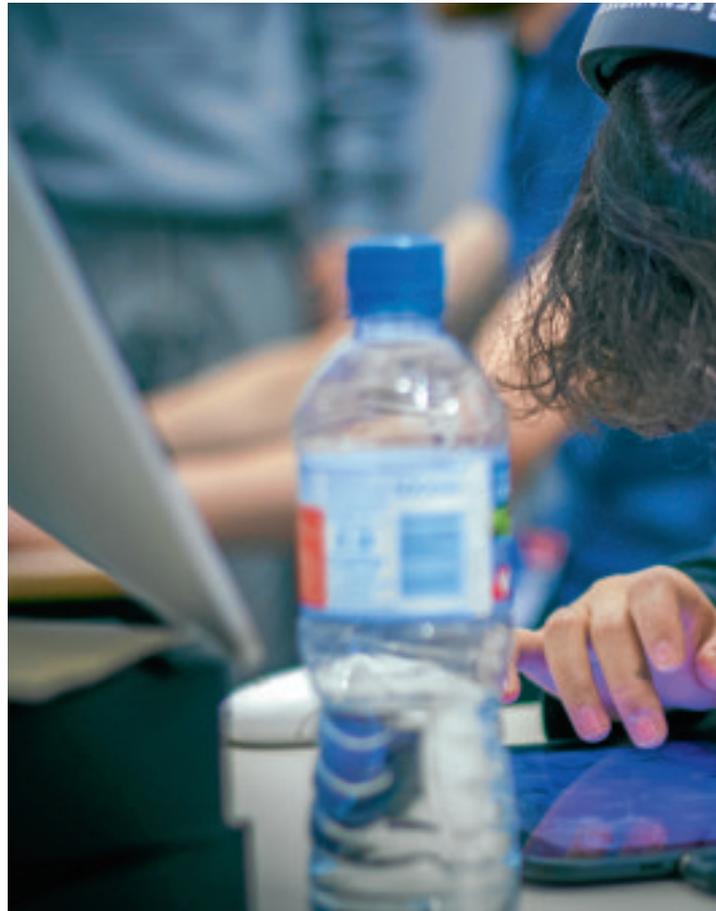
Chompy Chomp Chomp, the duo's debut game, was an Xbox hit and is currently available on Steam. "Last year we secured a meeting with Nintendo to discuss developing a new version of our game for the Wii U console which is what we're working on at the moment." *Chompy Chomp Chomp Party* is due out in 2015 and will be showcased in Cambridge in the next few weeks.

I also had a quick catch-up with Terry Cavanagh, who produced the devilishly-difficult *VVVVVV* (PC/Mac, iOS/Android/Ouya, Vita/3DS) and the dangerously-addictive *Super Hexagon* (iOS/Android/BlackBerry10, PC/Mac/Linux).

Finally, I got a chance to try out Sony's Project Morpheus (I discussed this technology in July's *Cambridge Business*). On display at Develop were two demos of their new virtual reality hardware, *The Deep* and *Street Luge*. The first seemed a more passive experience of the tech, so I picked the latter, which involved laying on a large beanbag, partially sitting up, similar to how you would a luge board, while wearing headset and headphones.

Although notably larger than the Oculus the form factor made it considerably more comfortable and for my

Project Morpheus: Street Luge



short two-minute test it didn't seem heavy. The screens are bright, easy to focus, high resolution and the use of a screen for each eye gave the impression of 3D.

The experience begins with you sitting very low to the ground on an open, mountain-side road that's on an incline. After a brief moment of being able to look around the scenery by simply moving my own head, the Luge begins to roll.

As it gains speed the roar of my wheels against the floor grows and I'm transported from the hot and busy expo I'm actually sitting in to this virtual world. The control system involved titling my own head left and right to influence the direction of the board, this felt odd at first



Concentration: A gamer at Brains Eden

and I wonder how the experience would have held up with a standard gamepad controller. The gameplay involved drafting behind cars for speed, squeezing under lorries, navigating corners and avoiding traffic. After 2 min 6 seconds I had completed my run.

Street Luge has probably got a way to go before it's at the level of being a consumer product but the combination of native gaming peripheral and Sony's Playstation gaming console is certainly an interesting one. VR definitely has some great potential, especially in the gaming market, but at the end of the day it will all come down to price and content. Too expensive and not enough worth while games and even the best tech will fail.

Meanwhile, back at home, I enjoyed the annual Brains Eden event at ARU in July. This year it was bigger than ever with a BAFTA-supported Symposium held on the Friday, a two-day games jam competition over the weekend and an exhibition of work on the Monday.

The VIVID-backed (Value Increase by Visual Design) gaming festival saw more than 100 students from across Europe, UK and for the first time, Canada coming together to work in 26 teams.

Conceived by Games Eden, Cambridge's games development network and produced by Creative Front, this vibrant event is fully supported and funded by industry leaders including ARM, Sony Guerrilla Cambridge, Frontier, Playstation First and Jagex.

The BAFTA-supported symposium included talks by industry veteran Andy Payne (BAFTA Games Committee and chair of UKIE) and Mike Bithell, creator of the hugely-successful BAFTA Award winning indie game, *Thomas Was Alone* (PC/Mac/Linux, PSN, Steam, iPad).

The event was won by Anglia Ruskin's very own *Bloated Squid* with their entry *Space Hole* a game about defending Earth from spaceship attack by carefully placing space phenomenon to divert the enemy's rockets.

The Interns from Howest University in Belgium took the runner up position, while the Mobile award went to NHTV of Applied Sciences with runner-up University of Bedfordshire. You can check out the games at creativefront.org/news/gamesproduced14 and find out more at brainseden.net.

Lots to watch out for as the games sector gears up for the vast revenues generated in the peak sales period - winter, and its centrepiece, Christmas! ■



Mike Bithell



Andy Payne