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Case Study of Westwood Studios

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Some images are linked to their respective sources.

It is the classic struggle between good and evil – a struggle that spans the depths of the past and the brilliance of the future. It is the fight for what is right; the fight for what is true. It is about doing everything in your god given power to overcome this foe. No, it's pretty much about setting up your defenses right in order to avoid a mammoth tank rush.

Command and Conquer, brainchild of Westwood Studios, is the game the truly defined and pushed the real-time strategy genre to the forefront. With this game Westwood defined their place in this cutthroat industry. They created one of the most successful franchises in computer gaming history with each new instantiation of C&C outselling the previous. Westwood Studios by focusing on high quality products, was, and still is, doing something right – very right.

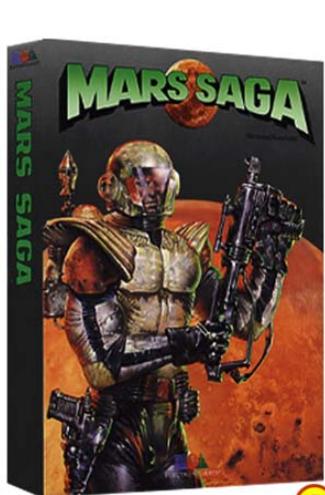
At the very heart of Westwood there lies its founders Brett Sperry and Louis Castle. These two were brought together by a common interest in gaming during the very infancy of the personal computer industry. In 1983 Castle worked as a salesman at a local computer store called Century 23, the oldest computer store in Nevada and the only place in the Las Vegas area that you could buy Apple Computer hardware and software [1]. It was a place that is akin the now infamous homebrew computer club where young code hackers would meet on a regular basis to exchange information, ideas and try to impress friends. This close-knit group, at one time, had thoughts of forming a company. The idea got as far as a name, “Out of the Dream”, but never much farther than that[1]. It was in one of these very meetings that Castle got to know a young 21-year-old freelance programmer named Brett Sperry. Castle remarks that “[Sperry] was kind of a local hero to me because he had my dream job of making games for a living.”[2] At the time Sperry was working on a deal he had signed with a company by the name of Epyx to create a game called “Dragonfire.” As this game neared completion he eventually he needed to send a final printout of the code to the publisher[3]. He called upon Castle for use of his ever-so-sophisticated dot-matrix printer. While the code was printing out Castle and Sperry, for the first time, got into an extended discussion about the game industry and the careers that they have now. Castle then shows Sperry some early routines for a game he is writing called “Bloodstone.”[1] At this point Sperry realized the immense programming skill in Castle and from this grew a strong mutual respect. It was from this need for a code printout that Westwood Studios was born. In 1985, on a trip through Yosemite, Sperry and Castle made the leap of faith and decided to form a company dividing the ownership 50/50[4]. They called Epyx from a tree phone in the park and initiated Brelous software (a strange concatenation of their two names), until they realized what an awful name that was and later changed it to Westwood Associates.[4]



For a while Westwood was riding with all of their eggs in one basket. They were relying heavily on Epyx software to give them projects and to fund their fledging development house. Some early projects included the Temple of Apshai trilogy and some 16-bit ports of game to the Amiga and the Atari ST.

Westwood, even in the beginning, always seemed to have a greater vision and a perspective that looked towards quality. They never did a straight port. They would sometimes “drastically change features in a game, sometimes making the game closer to the designers original vision.” Along with these ports Westwood also created some reasonably popular games such as *Dungeon Master*, *Battle Tech*, *Roadwar 2000*, and *Mars Saga*.

Mars Saga was Westwood’s first original game property. No longer were they bound up doing somewhat menial tasks such as ports. They were now doing their own independently designed and produced games. What Westwood attempted to do was to make an “RPG that was more like the paper



game *Traveler*”[5] but have the computer be the game master. Getting the game out proved more difficult than they had hoped. Four different producers handled the game at various times and ultimately “it lacked focus.” Westwood still had the problem of being small and private. The business that they were in did not allow them to take a creative venture that had a reasonable potential of failure. Castle says “we certainly did not have the reputation or even the ability to drive a product in a certain direction against the will of the publisher. The game was redefined on us a few times.”[5] In the end however this struggle more than likely would prove to be a valuable experience for the company, “it made [them] appreciate how difficult true innovation is.”[5]

In 1989 Westwood began a relationship with Disney that would prove to be one of the most important things as far as propelling the company into a full-blown development house. Three learning games were developed by Westwood during the time: “Donald’s Alphabet Chase”, “Mickey’s Runaway Zoo” and “Goofy’s Railway Express” to teach numbers, letters, and forms. These titles sold, what, at the time, seemed to be, staggering numbers – around 400,000 yearly. Westwood capitalized upon this revenue by feeding itself with it, growing to approximately 25 employees.[1]



Although Westwood had published quite a few titles by 1989, they really had not done much to rock the boat. They were more or less still another rough and tumble software development company doing what was necessary to be marginally successful in a very horizontal market. Westwood, driven by the far-reaching vision of Sperry, worked hard for the next couple years on a game called the *Legend of Kyrandia* – something that they felt had the



overwhelming potential to revolutionize a genre of RPGs[6]. *Kyrandia* had a point and click interface, something completely different that a standard text parser that was in every contemporary RPG. This is probably the first real visible example of taking advantage of the current technology and pushing it to its logical extents. However, like in the case of the 16-bit ports, Westwood decidedly took advantage of the hardware purely to facilitate the game play – not just because leveraging technology for the sake of technology was a way to impress a publisher or to add feature that didn’t actually create a better game.

Sperry and Castle were justifiably very excited about *Kyrandia*. They went to Sierra to demonstrate their breakthrough technology only to find out that Sierra had *Kings Quest V* in development with a



similar point and click interface. Despite a massive letdown, Sierra came across with an extremely unexpected proposition – they were willing to buy Westwood. Sperry recalls his reaction to the offer, “Lou and I weren't really ready to sell the company. We wanted freedom and control. Screw that!”^[6] This idea of freedom and control over what they spent their time making is also fundamental to why Westwood would become so successful. It is a concept that is thematic throughout their history. They are a company that is truly interested in what they do, making a high quality, high-class product

and not in just pleasing a publisher. In an effort not to be one-upped by Sierra, Virgin also made an offer to buy the tiny 30-person corporation^[6].



Over time it became obvious to both Sperry and Castle that merging with a larger entity would be more beneficial than detrimental. Sperry describes as one of the primary reasons that he fell for the idea is that Westwood “had big ambitions: We wanted to push the audio, the visuals, and the programming as far as they could go”; that and they were, as Castle says, basically “betting [their] home mortgages on each and every title.”^[6] In the end the decision came down to a choice between Sierra and Virgin. Sierra offered more money than Virgin did with the hook of wanting a large amount of control. Virgin however, although offering less money, put in writing that Westwood would maintain complete creative control as long as they met financial goals. Westwood took the high road between the two and in 1992 they merged with Virgin. Overall, this proved to be a very positive decision in the history of Westwood, Castle comments that “The years with Virgin were really great for Westwood, and we were allowed to build the company and the products into something really amazing within our industry.”^[6]



Following the coattails of *Kyrandia* Westwood developed and released *Dune II: The Building Of A Dynasty*, their first real time strategy game with a name that would have a very literal twinge in the coming years. *Dune II* took the new technology of total mouse based point and click interface and applied it to a much faster paced game. In large, *Dune II* was Westwood's response to traditional war gaming, something that they had firsthand knowledge of due to their previous relation with SSI. Westwood wanted to expand this “really small war game category, bring it some fresh ideas, and make it a fun game that more gamers can play.”^[7] *Dune II* took a concept that was designed around turn based, board game style, play and imbued it with same point and click interface system that made *Kyrandia* such a success. In a lot of ways *Dune II* broke new ground, but it was more or less an experiment in a totally uncharted area of computer gaming. It would take something more before Westwood would totally revolutionize the industry.



That something would come in 1995 in the form of the mega-hit *Command and Conquer: Tiberian Dawn*. In many ways *C&C* was a logical extension of everything Westwood had done right with *Dune II*. Although one of the principal strides in *Dune II* was to make the genre more accessible, *C&C* took this concept even further. The technology that is leveraged in this game is markedly simple; Westwood did not really make any new strides forward in the arena of low-resolution sprite graphics. Graphics came in at standard fare with a low resolution of 320x240 in DOS. The only driving technology behind the game seems to be great interface design combined with great game design. But this lack of flashy blocks of code does not hinder the game at all; it seems to be the point. *C&C*, like almost any game that takes the mass market by storm, succeeded because of simplicity combined with universal appeal. *C&C* was guided by a strong story told with highly polished full-motion video cut scenes combined with an amazing musical



score, one that has sold in CD format on its own to some success. What was given to the player was a classic good vs. evil situation in which they could play whatever side they wanted. The story of NOD vs. GDI was compelling and very well told and did not lack depth. To Sperry it was “about simplifying the geopolitical situation of today’s world and projecting, you know, a little bit into the future.”[7] C&C put you into the command position, calling on you to make all the decisions. It started off with basic overview of the situation and some training missions quickly crescendoing into player control of a massive army with many weapons just a click away. Sperry said, “C&C was a game built on the concept of how we like to outwit people.” He “wanted players to figure out the rules quickly and then have fun surprising themselves and opponents.”[7]

To merely call C&C a success would almost be misleading. C&C was an *incredible* success. It currently holds first place in the Guinness Book of World Records for best selling game of all time, grossing close to half a billion dollars and selling over 10 million copies – a figure that, so large, is almost unbelievable in the gaming industry[1]. Like any clear-minded capitalists, Westwood took complete advantage of their success with C&C and expanded this gaming front in many ways. The series was expanded with the release of the wildly successful C&C: Red Alert, a similar game based in pre world war II. This pushed forward the technology of its predecessor but did not change what fundamentally made the game.[8] And to little surprise, Westwood had another mega-hit, shipping an initial sell of over a million copies. From this point Sperry expanded the C&C universe in in all of its logical directions by creating C&C2: Tiberian Sun, C&C Sole Survivor, numerous expansion packs, a 3rd person shooter currently in development called C&C: Renegade, and just recently Red Alert II. To extol the greatness of each game is almost trivial. Westwood has a winning formula: Focus on quality, focus on what works; drive the game with what is fun and not the technology. And to dispel any doubt it really is working, Tiberian Sun had a pre-sell of 2.4 million units strong – and this game received only average reviews from gaming publications because it wasn’t really pushing forward the genre in many new directions. It still sold like crazy. This fact is testament to how well Westwood understands what is fundamentally important to them.



In 1998 Electronics Arts purchased Westwood Studios in a cash transaction valued at \$122.5 million.[9] Westwood today continues to be the predominant force in the RTS arena while also producing other unique, high quality, games such as Blade Runner and Monopoly (which is touted as the first big commercial game having centralized internet support). Westwood is a company whose design philosophy has always been rooted in the idea of freedom of creativity. Their primary focus is creating great games, not pumping them out at a high pace in order to satisfy a publishing schedule. The business side of things actually enhanced Westwood's game design rather than precluding innovation. Being

acquired by Virgin and later EA allowed, Westwood's designers to more fully focus on creating high quality software. It allowed them to explore some options in a wider timeframe than would be possible if they had remained an independent development house. C&C2 was in development for a full 3 years, a length of time that would be impossible to fund without strong corporate backing. Westwood's games always stayed on the leading edge but never attempted to push the envelope. Where some game companies strive to sell copies by adding somewhat useful features like 3d accelerated graphics Westwood focuses their technological efforts on what is core - the game play. They take advantage of the technology to make their games more fun and more accessible. What they want to create is something that involves a short learning curve and is fun for all. Looking at their history, it is clear to see that they are doing an amazing job. Westwood defined and continues to dominate the real-time strategy genre. They pushed forward in a direction that nobody had taken steps in, and they dominated. Even in today's market that is glutted by RTS games, Westwood still holds itself clearly ahead of the rest of the pack not only in terms of sales, but in quality of product.