

# Game on

**>> Montreal has become a hub for producing the best and most popular video games in the world. And some of the top programmers are coming here to get in on the action**

by **ERIK LEIJON**

photos by **RACHEL GRANOFSKY**

Perhaps it's the nightlife, the food or the relaxed atmosphere, but video game programmers are leaving their parents' basements and coming to Montreal in droves. The two main gaming hubs are situated in California and Japan, but Montreal is primed to become the East Coast's premiere gaming city.

The building blocks are already in place. The city boasts some of the most important development teams and most popular franchises. In 2004, Electronic Arts, the biggest game publisher in the world, built its state-of-the-art studio in Montreal. EA Montreal general manager Alain Tascan says this city, with its history of digital media (especially with animation) and the close proximity to four big universities, has "the competitive advantage to become the Hollywood of gaming."

Although Montreal's past may be entrenched with animation studios such as Softimage, the city's recent success could also be attributed to Ubisoft's rise to prominence. Their Splinter Cell series has now sold 12.5 million copies worldwide and their Prince of Persia series has moved five million. Their latest title, Splinter Cell: Chaos Theory, was given the highest score ever from OXM Magazine: 9.9 on 10.

The industry's rapid growth has led to an interesting problem—the shortage of talented programmers and artists. Both Ubisoft and Electronic Arts have had to go outside of Quebec to find programmers (about 25 per cent of Ubisoft's 1,000-plus employees come from elsewhere), and, in an effort to cultivate a new generation of Quebec developers, Ubisoft announced this February the creation of Ubisoft Campus. The program will provide college and university courses in game design, 3D animation, modelling and programming at the Université de Sherbrooke and CÉGEP de Matane.

While Ubisoft and EA could be considered the Coke and Pepsi of the Montreal gaming scene, smaller companies have also found success in their own ways. The city currently houses some of the most well-known mobile game developers, including Jamdat, Airborne Entertainment and Gameloft.

Even the Quebec government has recognized the potential of the gaming industry, as they announced in February they would be investing millions in Ubisoft's Montreal and Quebec City studios.

As a testament to this growing local industry, this November 2–3, more than 600 members of the games industry from Canada, the U.S. and Europe are expected to attend the second Montreal International Game Summit at Mount Royal Centre.

Here's a look at six people who are helping to put the city on top of the video game heap.

**Name:** Clint Hocking  
**Age:** 32  
**Job:** Creative Director,  
 Ubisoft Montreal  
**Birthplace:** Ontario  
**Current Project:** To be announced  
 (Not SC4)  
**CV:** Splinter Cell (Multiplatform),  
 Splinter Cell: Chaos Theory  
 (Multiplatform)  
**Games that inspired him:** System  
 Shock 2, Unreal Tournament



"Game designers have to be the ones to say, 'So what? It looks real, but what do I care? I want to feel something when I play this game.'"

After conquering the current generation with the best-selling and critically acclaimed Splinter Cell series, Ubisoft's Clint Hocking is looking to the future of gaming, which he says will involve drawing people even further into their favourite games.

"How do I make the players feel invested in a trust relationship with another person?" he asks aloud. "How do I make the player feel betrayal? Even if the systems are the same—run, shoot, jump, drive—how do I tune these systems so the player has an emotional investment? Well, it's really, really difficult. But it's our goal."

Hocking's progressive thinking is what has led to his quick ascent to the top of Ubisoft Montreal's world-renowned development studio. While working on his Master's in Creative Writing at UBC (which he eventually finished in 2004), Hocking began working on his "calling card" into the industry—mod level-design for Unreal Tournament. He says he sent his resumé to Ubisoft in 2001 "on a whim," but in three weeks found himself working in Montreal. He now lives on the Plateau with his fiancé and dog.

He began as a level designer for the original Splinter Cell, but by the end of the project he added the titles of game designer and scriptwriter. He eventually became creative director during the making of Chaos Theory.

Ubisoft, like Hocking, has become the leader in the new wave of Montreal developers. They recently opened a new studio in Quebec City and have over 1,000 employees in Montreal. Despite being self-taught, Hocking recommends those looking to join the rapidly growing world of game development should take advantage of new university programs, including the Ubisoft Campus.

"I had to learn it on my own in my spare time," Hocking says, "and they're being formally trained in it. These are the guys who are the future of the game industry."

**Name:** Alistair McNally  
**Age:** 34  
**Job:** Producer, Electronic Arts  
 Montreal  
**Birthplace:** Scotland  
**Current Project:** SSX: On Tour (PSP)  
**CV:** Medal of Honor: European Assault  
 (multiplatform), F1: World Grand Prix  
 (multiplatform)

At 34, Alistair McNally is an old man in the video game industry. His story of how he got into the business is one that would be unlikely to happen today.

In 1987 and '88, McNally was learning how to program at his home in Scotland when his work received attention from game companies. "I first started out making demos on the Commodore Amiga with my friends," he says. "From the demos, some of the game companies approached us to work on a game, and I moved down to London to work at Argonaut Software, which was doing Starglider 2 and Starfox."



Since then McNally has travelled between the U.K. and Japan, where he worked with publishers Nintendo, Sega and Konami. McNally has been in Montreal since EA Montreal's opening in February 2004.

McNally has witnessed first-hand how the art of making games has changed from its humble beginnings. Today, budgets are in the millions and staffs number in the hundreds. "It's gone from guys working in their bedrooms to big, multi-billion-dollar corporations that are producing games every month," he says.

While McNally enjoys the near-unlimited budget and resources that come from working for Electronic Arts, not to mention the pressure of having to live up to the reputations of the Medal of Honor and SSX franchises, he cautions that development teams can become too big and become "less manoeuvrable."

Despite the enormous size of these studios (EA Montreal itself is in the midst of planned growth every year), he cautions that it's much harder to break into the industry now than when he started. McNally though recommends that graduates tailor their portfolios for the companies they want to work for.

**Name:** Sylvain Schmidt

**Age:** 27

**Job:** Producer, Airborne Entertainment

**Birthplace:** Greenfield Park

**Current Project:** Family Guy: Stewie 2.0 (mobile)

**CV:** Tycoon Series (mobile)

**Games that inspired him:** Super Mario Bros., Civilization, Metroid

Mobile gaming is a different bird, so much so that console and PC game developers see it as a major step back. Where consoles and PCs become more complicated, and graphics and gameplay continue to evolve, mobile developers have to make due with tiny screens and limited memory.

Sylvain Schmidt doesn't see these challenges as impeding his

creativity, but rather as forcing him to think differently about games. "You have to look at the original PC or console game and find the core elements and adapt those to the cell phone. You have to find what's most fun in the game and keep it. You have to remove all the fluff."



Schmidt, who lives in Ville Émard, also doesn't believe in comparing console and mobile games, which he says are like "apples and oranges." While console games need hundreds of people and years to develop, mobile games take a few

months, and Schmidt works on multiple games at a time. Despite the busy schedule, he spends his downtime checking out local bands at his favourite small venues: Casa del Popolo, Café Campus, le Swimming, and some others he can't remember.

Schmidt began his career as a tester three years ago, working for local developers Microids, Strategy First and then Airborne. After testing for Airborne for eight months, he moved up to working on the actual games. Responsible for bringing the popular Tycoon series to mobile, he had to think about what makes a good mobile game. "You want games that become more compelling as you play, but can also be playing in five minute bursts," he says. "We're slowly finding out that we have to come up with completely different types of games. We have the limitations of the small screens and the controls, which aren't necessarily designed for gaming and which people aren't used to." Since a young age he's played games with a critical eye, often wishing that the games he played "came with level editors."

The mobile gaming industry is already in the midst of major growth, and mobile developers like Schmidt are essentially writing the books on how to develop good cell phone games.

**Name:** Frederic Bibet  
**Age:** 36  
**Position:** Development Director, Mystic Software  
**Birthplace:** France  
**Current Project:** Dual Master 3 (GBA), unannounced DS project(s)  
**CV:** Superman (GBA), Lucky Luke (Genesis), Alone in the Dark (Saturn)  
**Games that inspired him:** Mainly driving games, like Burnout



Sometimes it can be hard for a smaller company to compete with the big boys, and in Montreal EA and Ubisoft suck up a lot of the talent and attention.

But a smaller company can have the advantage of being an expert at a particular type of game. Mystic only has 20 employees at their Montreal studio (they also have a studio in the Ukraine working on mobile games), and their bread and butter is the handheld console, most notably Nintendo's Gameboy and DS (they are also looking into potentially developing Sony PSP games).

Mistic have taken advantage of their knowledge of the portables by creating their own development tools, which Frederic Bibet says allows them to "spend time on the game and not the technology." With the tools, Mistic developers can make changes through computer graphic interface without programming.

Bibet got his start in France when working for Infogrames (now Atari) in 1993. His father worked for a computer company, giving him the chance to "play computer at home and to learn how to program at an early age." When he originally arrived in Montreal to be in charge of Mistic five years ago, Infogrames wanted the company to work in interactive television. That didn't work out as planned, but the Game Boy was considered to be similar and Mistic has been working on games as an independent studio since 2003.

Unlike many of the other local studios, Mistic has no plans of any massive expansion in the near future. "Our objective is not just to grow. We're going to make quality titles for the Nintendo DS," he says.

Bibet says Montreal is an ideal place to develop games, because of the city's status as the European foothold in the continent. Our physical proximity to the U.S. and our cultural proximity to Europe allows, he

says, for Montreal developers find a happy medium between the two markets. He also says he likes people in Montreal better than in France.

Since coming here, Bibet met a local woman, fell in love, got married and is now the happy father of a two-year-old girl.

**Name:** David Lightbown

**Age:** 26

**Job:** Lead Technical Director, Artificial Mind and Movement

**Birthplace:** Montreal

**Current Project:** Teen Titans (multiplatform)

**CV:** Scaler (Xbox), Scooby-Doo (multiplatform)

**Games that inspired him:** I created games in BASIC and logo writer



Artificial Mind and Movement (a2m) is the go-to studio for big corporations looking to branch out their licences to the gaming world. They have already brought brands like Bugs Bunny, the Grinch, Monsters Inc., Scooby Doo and Carmen Sandiego into the video game world, and while these titles may not appeal to the older crowd, no one can deny their popularity with the younger set.

"These games allow us to stuff our coffers, and because of it we have the tools that allow us to experiment," says David Lightbown. "We are working on concept prototypes, even some more mature titles." It's been a busy year for the NDG resident, who's flown over 30,000 kilometres just this year for various conferences.

Lightbown, who learned how to use 3D animation software in his basement where he grew up on Nuns' Island (although strangely enough, he never owned a video game console when he was younger), doesn't see a2m's pedigree of developing children's games as hindering their ability to branch out on their new, unannounced next-gen projects, but does admit, "It can be hard to break out of that shell once you're doing the same thing."

Working with existing licenses also means working closely with the creators or corporations that own the brand. But, other than following a pre-existing visual style guide, a2m are able to create their own storylines. They've also released original titles such as Scaler (Xbox) and Get on Da Mic (multi), a hip-hop karaoke game. (Lightbown himself is quite the music buff—he has his own home music studio and he first played the cello at age four).

a2m currently employs 200 and is expanding as they focus on their upcoming handheld and next-gen console projects. The company plans on utilizing Montreal's talent base and bringing in talent from the U.K. and U.S. as well.

Even though big budget children's movies such as The Incredibles and Scooby-Doo are beloved by people of all ages, their gaming equivalents don't necessarily pique the interest of older gamers. Lightbown wouldn't mind changing that, but points out that nobody can argue with sales. "Even a game like God of War [a critically acclaimed title for the PS2] didn't sell like Scooby-Doo."

**Name:** Gareth Morgan  
**Age:** 36  
**Position:** Senior Project Manager,  
 Softimage  
**Birthplace:** Wales  
**Current Project:** Softimage-XSI  
**CV:** Softimage-3D  
**Games that inspired him:** Doom



While developers are the ones who bring the games to life, Softimage creates the software that lets them flex their creative muscles. They've been based in Montreal since 1992, and while their logo doesn't appear on the boxes of games their software was used on, they recently were involved with the popular PC game Half-Life 2.

"Valve [who developed HL2] was one of the first companies to take high-end character technology and bring it to interactive games," says Morgan, who goes by Gaz—"That's the accepted corruption" back home in Wales, he says. Softimage's responsibility was to focus on character creation and augment the "expressiveness and believability of characters." As an example of how much more lifelike games have become, he compared Sega's Virtua Fighter, the first true "groundbreaking 3D game" released in 1993, and Half-Life 2.

But as the games become more real, Morgan says there could be difficulties for smaller studios in the future. "Games are going to be five, 10, 20 times more powerful," he says. "Art has to get a lot more detailed. Games will take longer to create, and more artists means more cost."

Game companies, especially the smaller ones, don't usually develop important gaming elements like graphics engines, artificial intelligence or physics engines themselves, but rather rely on outside companies to design the software. Morgan then has to make sure the software is both technologically advanced and simple to use. He sees it as handling the "technical aspects," while artists can worry about "artistic challenges."

Softimage has also been a good starting point for those interested in development, as Morgan points out that ex-Softimage employees have gone on to work at Ubisoft, who in turn use Softimage's XSI software to create all of their CG-cinematics, demonstrating how tight-knit the community is. Even though the company works with 3D animation of any kind, not just video games, Morgan notes that they have been focusing on games for over 10 years. "(Softimage) did it before it became chic," he laughs.

When not working or gaming, he likes to relax at his cottage in the Eastern Townships with his wife, or catch a sci-fi flick (his favourite is Blade Runner, and he prefers the director's cut). He says he has some reservations about the new Doom movie, although he will go see it.

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