The Montreal Indie Game Development Scene… Before Ubisoft

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The year 2012 marked the 15th anniversary of Ubisoft's Montreal studio. Established in 1997, it has come a long way from being a young team of rookies working on Playmobile games, to a 2200+ staff powerhouse pumping out massive hits like *Assassin's Creed* and *Far Cry*. I can still recall some very preliminary conversations with Ubisoft execs asking for my thoughts on whether Montreal would be a good place to set up shop.

Many credit Ubisoft for getting the Montreal game development scene rolling, in part because they were the first major global player to set up in the city, and they heralded in the era of positive government intervention (i.e. the multimedia labour tax credits regime). And, in many ways they served this pivotal role of accelerating the clustering of big game studios in Montreal; EA, Eidos, Warner Brothers, Funcom, and THQ all followed on the successes of Ubisoft.

However, it is easy to forget that a game industry largely made up of independent studios already existed in Montreal (and neighboring Quebec City), that there was already momentum building before Ubisoft arrived. There was already groundwork and history in place – for games specifically, but also more broadly in terms of graphics and simulation (think Discreet, Softimage, CAE, Kaydara, etc.), and creativity (think Cirque du Soleil, NFB, etc).

The fact that Montreal was *not* a blank slate is an important detail that escapes most economists and politicians who are trying to recreate similar clustering effects in their own city or country. You'd be surprised at how many believe the solution to building a game industry is simply to invite Ubisoft to set up a new studio. The catch-22 of clustering dynamics is that you have to have a cluster to build a cluster. Thus, a pre-existing ecosystem is essential.

And so, what did that ecosystem look like in Quebec, prior to Ubisoft's arrival? Great question. While I'm not an actual academic (I only play one on TV) that could conduct a proper study and analysis on this, I do have a few industry friends that were around during the pre-Ubisoft years. So, I asked.

While only anecdotal, and perhaps a tad fuzzy given the passage of time, what we discovered was a game development scene already in full swing, made up by a collection of independent studios.

The first developer and publisher in Quebec (and arguably in Canada) was Logidisque, which put out their first game in 1982. An archived CBC video shows what looks to be a Pac-Man clone in action: http://archives.radio-canada.ca/sciences_technologies/informatique/dossiers/709-4169/

A few years later CRAPO was making edutainment software. It became Micro-Intel later for edutainment games, but was sold to a US-based company. CinéGroup Interactive also produced a series of six games on CD-ROM in that timeframe that were commercialized abroad to French markets.

Then there was Strategy First, which was officially started in 1991. Working on early PC strategy games, they could be considered the first "real" game studio as we would recognize one today.

The most prominent early activity, however, was around the formation of the ancestors of today's Behavior Interactive, Canada's largest independent studio. It is quite a whirlwind; so in Remi Racine's own words:

> "MMI - one of Behaviour's ancestors and I co-founded, started in March 1994. We were sold to Malofilm in August 1996 and merged to coincide with Megatoon (founded in Quebec in 1992 and bought by Malofilm in 1995). Malofilm became Behaviour in late 1996 and was owned by Discreet Logic founder, Richard Svalwinski. I rented the space on St-Laurent to Ubisoft in 1998 as I was in charge of Interactive and Operation at Behaviour. Small world. I bought Behaviour Interactive in 1999 and moved completely in 2000 to Montreal."

That move motivated Dominique Brown to stay in Quebec City and start his own studio, Beenox (which was bought later by Activision). In the same timeframe, there was a group within Loto-Québec working on games for the Videoway system, which was still active. The group folded in the mid-90s, which instigated the start of Ingenio (the still active game/R&D arm of Loto-Québec).

Other studios starting right around the Ubisoft era included Mistic and Kutoka. Mistic started in 97, working on handheld titles, but was later merged with DTI (founded in 95, with a focus on in-flight games), and bought by Atari in 2000. It has now since merged with Ludia. Kutoka started in 97 as well, and has a focus on kids' games.

Studio ArtMedia was also founded in 97 by one of the early collaborators in Megatoon, Pierre Moisan. For eight years, they were the biggest game developer in Québec City (up to 75 employees), and launched "Qui a croque la Lune?" a best-selling CD-ROM that also sold in Europe (published by Micro-Application), based on a tale by Quebec singing icon, Jacques Michel. They got lots of local media coverage. Moisan was later involved in the establishment of Ubisoft's Québec City studio, before moving onto Frima.

Similarly, Guy Boucher was one of the co-founders of Megatoon in '92, who moved on to form Sarbakan in '98. Boucher also points to Abstrax, a game studio in Trois-Rivières that was founded by Claude Pelletier and Martin Ross in '88. They made the game Wrath of the Demon for the Amiga, Atari ST, and Commodore 64. Today, Claude is VP Creative at Sarbakan and Martin is Sarbakan's CTO.

On the academic front, Centre NAD was formed in '92, with fellow art/game school ICARI established around the same time. Also, the Society for Arts & Technologies (SAT) was founded in 94.

There are many other studios that were either formed early/mid '90s, or very soon after the arrival of Ubisoft, including: Cinar, Micomeq, Dream Mechanics, ICE Multimedia, Enzyme Digital Marketing, De Marque, Neurovolt, Pandore, PTM, Dyad, TrioTech, Digital Fiction, Airborne, Microids, Quazal, and a few others that I'm still tracking down. While it would certainly require proper research to validate all of those founding dates, and to trace genealogical ties between the various studios and co-founders, the point here is not to create an *accurate* tree, but to recognize that a robust tree was *already* in existence before the arrival of Ubisoft.

While I'd have to ask Yves Guillemot directly to prove it, my guess is that if such a robust ecosystem of independent game studios and related entities had not already existed in Quebec, Ubisoft would not be here today. And, in an interesting loop, the success of Ubisoft and the other big publisher studios is laying the groundwork for a new crop successful indies to emerge.

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