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This interview is excerpted from a series we conducted in 2010 with Michael Thornton Wyman, founder and CEO of Big Splash Games (<http://www.bigsplashgames.com/>). Big Splash Games is a boutique game design and development studio well known for its Chocolatier series of casual games. Before founding Big Splash Games, Wyman worked as a Producer for Electronic Arts and Maxis, and a Project Leader for Lucas Learning, contributing to such titles as SSX On Tour, Def Jam Fight For New York, Star Wars Pit Droids, and SimTunes.

What has it been like these past few years being on your own, especially after having worked at one of the largest developers in the world?

In terms of post EA, it's been interesting for sure. Totally different of course, but a lot more fun for me personally. I liked working at EA a lot, but at my level I felt like I was a cog in a very large machine. I enjoy being my own boss, and being in control of our own destiny. I liken it to working on a tiny, independent (read: low budget) film rather than on a blockbuster. Each has its charms, but the indie approach fits my style more.

What are these charms?

For one thing, with smaller projects, it's a lot easier to take creative risks. We're working on a new mechanic with our new game, for example (which is why it's taking so long). In a big company, I think there's a lot of adrenaline – I don't know how else to describe it. Being part of the huge team making the huge game – it's great to be on a high performing team with tons of folks who, for the most part, are awesome at whatever their role is. And, since the company is spending literally millions to make and market the product, you know that plenty of people will see it on day one, it will sell a certain amount, and so on.

In contrast, with a tiny project, you trade off some of that certainty of exposure for creative control. This doesn't mean you trade off talent – with a small shop, everyone needs to be super talented – there's just no leeway for "dead weight" (which there is more room for in large studios). That said, I think EA, in particular, at least while I was there, was fairly cutthroat – what I mean is they had no problem firing people that they felt weren't pulling their weight. Morale-wise, that way of doing things sets up an extremely competitive environment, which can be both motivating and intimidating.

Anyway, with a tiny studio you also trade off the ability to do lots of things at once. For example, we initially planned to work simultaneously on *Chocolatier: Decadence by Design* and our new IP, but that proved too difficult. We want to stay small, so we

tabled the new IP until we shipped *Decadence by Design*. This means that now we just don't have a lot of room for error. Big studios can make a few mistakes and recover. Boutique shops – not so much. And yet, this is a bit counter-intuitive because big studios are less willing to take big risks. At EA, and this is already several years ago, we wouldn't do a game if we thought it would sell less than a million units.

Still, being small does have its advantages. As a colleague of mine from Hipsoft (creators of the Build-A-Lot series of games) once put it to me, "We want to stay small and keep it all."

How does dead weight happen in such a competitive an industry?

I guess it's the same as anywhere else: inertia, needing people to do the work, etc. At the end of the day, it's unpleasant and expensive to fire someone.

Game development is a notoriously lengthy process. How do you keep your energy up, particularly in a small studio where there is a lot more individual responsibility?

It's a challenge. At a certain point it becomes a slog, no matter what, especially when you've got outside partners doing some "heavy lifting" (which we do). Then it's a question of managing, quality control, etc. – which can get tedious. Our solution at Big Splash Games has been extensive, informal user testing. As more features get implemented, and through the changes in our iterative process, we often bring in a tester with "fresh eyes" and simply watch them play. It helps point out gaps in player understanding, but also helps us keep our eye on the ball in terms of what we have accomplished so far, as well as seeing progress over time.

At EA, things were more formalized. To be fair, though, the projects I worked on at EA were all sequels, so the core mechanics had been ironed out, literally for years. At Lucas Learning, however, I was Project Lead on a brand new game and mechanic, and we did a lot of testing there as well. My own style for testing has certainly evolved over time.

How so?

With the casual, downloadable model (e.g. try and buy), as long as you've themed the game right, folks will give it a shot. Moment-to-moment game play is what it's all about. So, with our current project, we do totally hands-off testing. Basically, we bring someone from the target audience in, point them to the icon, and let them do whatever they want. They can play for five minutes, or for an hour. We answer no questions, although we ask lots. I think it would be even better if we actually lied, that is, told the testers we were testing the game for other people, and that we had nothing to do with making it. But I'm not a good liar.

All this is on-site?

Well, "on-site" is my house (or one of my partner's houses). So yes, although I always offer to bring my laptop to the tester's house or wherever – as long as it's not a public place. We want to simulate the end user's environment as best as we can.

Our goal with the iterative approach has been to get the game to the point where testers want to keep playing when the hour expires – as that's how it works in the real world. Players get to demo the game for an hour, after which they need to buy it in order to keep playing.

There is a curious intimacy about this sort of testing and user research, an intimacy that typically is not part of commercial game development. Small, tight knit teams, working in home offices, user testing in the living room – do players feel that intimacy in the actual design of your games?

Hmmm... I don't think so. I think the end users, for the most part, see the game as one of many, many choices they have. Hopefully, they'll react to the charm, humor, etc. – but intimacy? I don't think so. I mean, there are some hard core, sophisticated fans out there who pay attention to such things as who is the developer and who is the publisher, etc., but for the most part the players in our market are all about the experience of the game. They could give a rat's ass about who actually made the thing. They look at every game as just a game, and they compare games to each other in terms of how much they like them.

So what is a boutique game?

I think it goes back to the creative risks question, but I'm not sure intimacy figures into it. For example, I love PopCap games (<http://popcap.com/>), but *Plants vs. Zombies* doesn't feel intimate. It just feels wacky and cool and polished, like somebody really loved that thing up. I don't have that sense from games coming out of the larger studios (even though PopCap has 200+ people, I believe). I want our games to feel shiny and polished like that. To me, that's what defines boutique-y quirkiness.

So there is a tangible difference between a boutique developer and small developer?

Perhaps this is just me being a romantic, but I think boutique connotes more creativity. Not to confuse things too much, but you do have work-for-hire outfits. For example, there are shops that will do the Wii port of a game for EA. There's not really much design there, just a straight, heavy lifting port. These can be small shops, but almost at the opposite end of the creative, cool factor. In my experience, though, this is always a means to an ends for these guys. They set out to take on some of that work to hire up, get the team oiled, etc., to work on what they really want to work on – their own game.

And yet boutique developers generally tend to be on the small side, personnel-wise. Are there features or qualities that make for a boutique feel that happen naturally in a small setting, but are not so easily replicated in a bigger one?

I don't know. I mean, big companies have tried this, and there are success cases – *PaRapa the Rappa* out of Sony's Studio 0 is still my all-time favorite – but they are few and far between. Mostly it feels like a big company trying to be quirky, if you catch my drift. Maybe Japan is better at getting something quirky out of a large company/studio than those of us in the west. We know of the breakthroughs that help push the various envelopes in games – I think of *LittleBigPlanet* in this way, as well –

because they are new, fresh, try something wacky, and strike a chord with consumers. We don't hear about all the failures, which far outweigh these success stories. This is the nature of risk, and circles back to the understandable reasons why larger companies, with investors to answer to, are more risk-averse. You know, as an investor, you wouldn't focus on the concept of them being risk-averse, you'd simply say they are smarter. This is exactly the same reason movie studios crank out sequels, or even more disappointing, remakes.

Is it easier to discern a good idea – a mechanic or plot line – in a boutique shop?

Not discern so much as pursue. In boutique shops it's easier to convince folks to go out on that limb, maybe because there are literally less folks to convince. At the same time, these ideas can waylay you. You have the freedom to pursue them, but not the size or the budget to make sure that pursuit happens smoothly and on time. This is the failure condition we try to avoid. If Ubisoft pursues a title that doesn't work out, tant pis, life moves on. If we make a significant misstep – poof, we're gone.

Obviously, working with outside contractors is big in both the boutique and AAA worlds. Could you talk a bit about the phenomenon?

Well for one thing, the phenomenon mostly depends on the contractor. I've worked with companies as well as individuals, and like everything there are pluses and minuses with each. Companies are better at project management, they're more reliable, they deliver on time, and there's less headache. Individuals = higher quality work, but a lot more management headaches – in a nutshell.

AAA companies use contract shops because they don't want to hire and ramp up, but they need more bodies to make games, especially for current gen hardware. I also think they go out and acquire small shops – EA examples of this are acquisitions like Criterion many years ago, PlayFish more recently – because they see it as easier than innovating themselves. There's less risk, but it's more expensive, of course.

Now, I think both AAA and boutique shops ultimately rely on outside contractors for the same reason – to save money and hedge bets. There's no need to hire, no long term commitment. Contractors are generally overseas and cheaper.

Are there different grades of contractors? That is, are there some that work primarily with AAAs and others that smaller developers and boutiques prefer?

Some large contract shops prefer not to work with smaller companies, but for the most part I don't think there's a whole lot of difference. I don't see a lot of stratification – mostly, the difference is by region: Do you want to go to India, or Eastern Europe, or China? Issues like that.

Are there regional differences in terms of the kinds or quality of work that gets produced?

Yes, although I don't think I'm the best person to speak to that. At the end of the day, I'm a believer in "you get what you pay for" – meaning, in my experience, trying to go too cheap doesn't usually end well. For *Chocolatier*, we went with a Ukrainian

company because I had worked with some other folks from Ukraine when I was a Producer at Maxis many years ago and had a good experience.