



changing the game

3d realms bets big on new ip

3D Realms got its start in the shareware market almost 20 years ago as Apogee. Best known for its premier character, Duke Nukem, and the legendary delays since his last appearance (see sidebar), 3D Realms has been lending its development expertise to hand-selected projects off and on since the early '90s. Wolfenstein 3D, Descent (before it was sold to Interplay), Max Payne, and Prey all came to life with the help of 3D Realms – both financially and creatively. The strange thing is, with the exception of Prey, you won't see their name on any of the game boxes. So how will a company with this low of a profile become what it calls “the Jerry Bruckheimer of the game industry?”

“We generally don't mind staying behind the scenes, and really that's probably the best way for us to handle things,” says Scott Miller, 3D Realms co-founder and head of the company's Projects division. “Generally how it works

is either we'll approach a team with an idea or they'll approach us and we end up reworking their idea, trying to blend in all of the things that we learned over the years. We're really trying to focus on having a gameplay hook, a storytelling hook, and a technology hook – just trying to have these epic games.”

Aside from the creative back and forth that 3D Realms enjoys with the developers it works with, the company also provides funding to get these projects off the ground. This in turn allows up-and-coming developers to bypass the traditional publishing model. “When you're working with a publisher, generally the publisher has full ownership and you're just kind of treated as a contractor,” Miller says. The standard 3D Realms Project deal is a 50/50 IP split on the game in development. “That way the team is really motivated and everyone has ownership in it,” Miller says. “And when people have ownership in something they're going to do their best work.” But how did

3D Realms carve out this Hollywood equivalent of the “producer” role in the first place? The seeds of 3D Realms Projects started back in the early '90s when co-founders Scott Miller and George Broussard saw some interesting games coming out of Softdisk. It turns out that they were created by John Carmack, John Romero, and several other key members of the team who would later form id. Apogee was able to get the team to create Commander Keen for them during off-hours at Softdisk. Needless to say, Softdisk wasn't pleased that another publisher had a game made at its offices. In order to avoid legal entanglements, it was agreed that id would get to keep the Commander Keen IP, but they

would have to make 12 more games for Softdisk.

During this tenure, id developed a 3D engine and implemented it in games like Catacomb 3D and Hovortank. Miller saw the potential in the jump to 3D and asked id to make a 3D title for his company. “Unfortunately, they could not devote the time to pursue such a game because of their ongoing commitment to Softdisk,” Miller says. “Recognizing that a 3D game needed to be made for shareware while the iron was hot, I proposed the following deal to id: Apogee would secretly make a game for Softdisk and put the

Apogee made a game called ScubaVenture, which went to Softdisk, and id made Wolfenstein 3D for us.”

Wolfenstein 3D went down in FPS history and boosted both id and Apogee to high-profile status. The windfall allowed Broussard to focus on bringing the Duke Nukem franchise to 3D while Miller searched out a new promising game to bring into the fold. The company got together with Parallax and started work on Descent. Partway through development, however, rising costs forced 3D Realms to sell its stake in the game off to Interplay, effectively cutting off 3D Realms'

id logo on it, and this would give id the time they need to make a 3D game for Apogee to release. This is exactly what happened,



chance at a repeat performance. Descent ended up being one of Interplay's top titles.

After Duke Nukem 3D exploded onto the scene in 1996, 3D Realms searched out a new project. It had previously worked with Finnish developer Remedy on a racing game called Death Rally and the team was anxious to make another title. One game called Dark Justice caught their eye. “It was sort of top-down isometric kind of 3D game where the ceilings were gone and you just saw [the character] walking around in rooms and shooting,” Miller remembers. He saw potential, but had some different ideas with the direction. “We want to do what we did with Duke Nukem and focus on a lead central character,” Miller said to the Remedy team. “So we developed the character of Max Payne, went full 3D, went with a whole modern day New York story. Basically, we were really involved with the design of the game and helped them shape what became Max Payne.”

Samuli Syvahuoko, co-founder of Remedy, reflects on 3D

Realms' input on Max Payne. “I still recall when Scott Miller visited Finland in the late '90s. We were playing around with an idea that the bullets in the game would actually be modeled and they'd physically fly out of the guns, as opposed to weapons being instant-hit (like they used to be). To demonstrate to Scott that the bullets were actually flying in the air, the game was slowed down. When Scott saw this effect, he immediately thought it needed to be incorporated into the core gameplay somehow. And after a while, bullet-time was born.”

Remedy and 3D Realms split IP ownership and royalties 50/50. Both companies made tens of millions off of the series and eventually sold the rights to Take-Two for \$48 million. Syvahuoko



went off to found mobile games company Fathammer in 2000, and 3D Realms started looking again for a new project. Human Head approached the company, interested in working with them somehow. “We had previously worked on [Prey] in the '90s and it was just kind of sitting dead for us,” Miller says. “We decided to resurrect it and [Human Head] liked the idea so we handed over

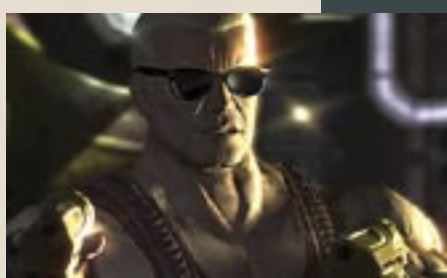
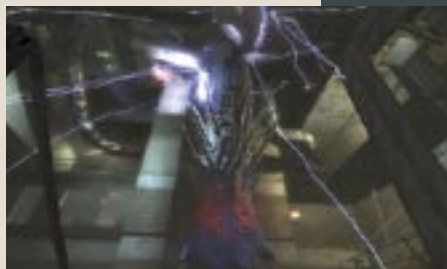
all of our design materials. Not only that, but we decided to rework the design for how the game had been brought up to that date, which was back in 2001.” Prey met with critical success and sold over a million units worldwide.

After selling Fathammer in 2006, Samuli Syvahuoko got back into console and PC gaming with his new company, Recoil Games, and pitched 3D Realms on what eventually became Earth No More, a game based on disaster genre films (see page 40). Syvahuoko says the reason he wanted to work with 3D Realms again was because of their attitude towards design and free-flowing creative structure. “It all came down to a decade-old relationship of mutual trust and respect,” Syvahuoko says. “If you have two very creative and professional parties working together seamlessly, you are bound to achieve great results.”

Starting with Earth No More, 3D Realms is taking their Projects division to the next level. “In the past, we've only focused on work-

ing with one outside developer at a time,” Miller says. “Now we're deciding that there's really no reason why we only have to work with one external team.” Three other unannounced projects are in the works, and the company hopes to have up to eight total when they're running at full steam.

Though finding developers interested in the Projects system hasn't been all that tricky. The lure of creative control, IP ownership, and bargaining power when it comes time to shop the game to publishers is tough to deny. Miller also points out that most of the developers 3D Realms has worked with have gone on to great independent success. “[It's] like Remedy with Max Payne, now they're a fully independent studio that can call their own shots and develop their own projects,” Miller says. “They've now got a super high profile deal with



Microsoft [for Alan Wake – Ed.] and had they not worked with us and gone the normal route of trying to get work with publishers, I really doubt that would have happened.”

But 3D Realms' focus on new IPs and smaller developers doesn't mean they're opposed to revisit past franchises. After all, don't they still share the rights to Prey with Human Head? “Yeah, there's definitely a hint there,” Miller says. “I can't announce anything now, but, yeah, you're on the right trail.”

ALWAYS BET ON DUKE

New IPs and fresh ideas are great and all, but what about that other project? You know, the one that's been in development for over a decade now. Should gamers be concerned that all of this 3D Realms Projects business is taking away resources from the much-maligned Duke Nukem Forever? “No, not at all because basically this company is co-owned by two people, myself and George Broussard,” says Scott Miller. “George Broussard is Mr. Duke Nukem. That's really his project. I don't have much to do with that and he doesn't have much to do with all of the external projects that I work on.”

Since we're on the subject anyway, how is the good Duke doing these days? “Anything I say now is going to be like ‘Yeah, I'll believe it when I see it,’” says Miller. “So there's really nothing I can say now that's going to appease anyone or convince anyone or anything like that. We are absolutely the first to admit that this project is an industry joke at this time. There's no doubt about it. We're kind of a victim of our past success. Because we were so successful in the past,

in a way it kind of gave us too much time to try and make the perfect game. But in the last year internally we've done a lot of new things, brought in a lot of new experienced people, and refocused the project. From an outsider's point of view, even though I'm inside the company, I can say that there's a light at the end of the tunnel finally. I'm not

going to give any sort of release date or anything, but this thing is moving quickly forward. Obviously, no game is worth any sort of wait like this, but this game's going to make people happy for sure.”

For now, check out these screens of how the game looks today. The lower image previously appeared on the web about the size of a postage stamp in a 3D Realms job posting, and the upper has never been seen outside of the company before. This is the largest 3D Realms would allow the screens to appear in print.

(Continued on page 40)



■ Players will take on the role of Will Forsyth, second from the left

earth no more

disaster done right

(Continued from page 39)

PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360 | PC
 > **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION (MULTIPLAYER TBA)
 > **PUBLISHER** TBA
 > **DEVELOPER** RECOIL GAMES/3D REALMS
 > **RELEASE** 2009

“... now humankind must face the results of its foolishness”
 — 3D Realms' Scott Miller

Picture some of the big disaster movies and thrillers in recent film history. *Aliens*, *War of the Worlds*, *Terminator 2*, *28 Days Later*, *The Thing*. All of these movies are linked by epic action, major threats to humanity, and ensemble casts that may not always get along due to the extreme circumstances. At this point in gaming, there really hasn't been a sufficient counterpart to this genre. Newly formed developer Recoil Games (run by the co-founder of Remedy) is out to change that with the help of 3D Realms and their revamped Projects program.

Earth No More opens in a small New England town recently quarantined due to a mysterious outbreak. Poisonous red vines have been spreading quickly, simultaneously strangling and terraforming the environment, not to mention mutating nearby plant and animal life. The developers are saying right up front that this so-called spore isn't from outer space; in fact, they're trying to stay far away from sci-fi clichés. “[The spore] is the result of man's ongoing and abusive tampering with nature herself,” says 3D Realms co-founder Scott Miller. “Just as when man discovered the power of the atom, we had a choice to use that power

for good or otherwise. Sadly, man always chooses ‘otherwise.’ It is using that same blueprint that the spore came about, and now humankind must face the results of its foolishness.” Lead character Will Forsyth happens to be at this ground zero along with four other characters that he will team up with along the way. “The primary thrust of gameplay surrounds the nucleus of this human interaction, which is the ensemble cast,” says creative director Raphael van Lierop. “Each character in our cast is fully realized, with their own back-stories, personalities, motivations, and secrets. Each character brings their own perspective to the experience, and a lot of the gameplay and storytelling is driven by the conflict that arises when these personalities and perspectives clash. Each cast member has their own arc, and nobody will be unchanged by the events that unfold during the game. So you'll get to see real character growth, something that is core to enjoying a book or movie, but

something we rarely get to see in a game.” With all of this interaction and dialogue, it's easy to assume that you'll be staring at a lot of cutscenes. But Earth No More will have none of them—at least not in a traditional sense. The game will utilize a conversation mechanic that will supposedly rival Mass Effect. “We are developing a truly interactive dialogue system that lets you either remain passive to group conversations or participate as much as you want, and with whomever you want,” Miller says. If you let the conversations run their course without any input, however, you will suffer some unspecified consequences in the following levels. The development team is specifically moving away from what

they call the “lone hero,” while also avoiding a squad-based direction. Players will work alongside allies in a manner more along the lines of Half-Life 2 rather than Rainbow Six, with everything from puzzle solving to attacks. “We're going to design almost every weapon in the game to where it's going to have a sort of collaborative mode to it,” says Miller. One gun called the Linker works like a reverse proton pack from *Ghostbusters*. Players are encouraged to cross the streams and focus attacks together to gain extra attack power against more imposing enemies. Another possible scenario has one character carrying a charging device that strengthens the weapons of those around him. This person won't be able to equip a weapon himself, so he'll have to

rely on others to protect him. The good guys aren't the only ones who can team up, however. Enemies are being designed to complement each other's skills as well. For example, a certain plant enemy will shoot out poisonous spores that hook into you and are more of an annoyance than anything else. Later on, however, these spores will also serve as a tracking beacon that will help other enemies sniff out your position. Another bird-type enemy is relatively weak on its own, but it has the ability to call in reinforcements. The developers want every enemy to somehow gain an advantage by grouping with another. “We're going to develop as many [of these relationships] as we can, 30 to 50, to where one enemy

on its own is sort of dangerous, but two or even three enemies in combination becomes really, really tough,” Miller says. This doesn't even figure in the most dangerous enemy of all—one controlled by another player. In addition to the ability to play through the entire campaign via online co-op, Earth No More will allow players to jump into others' games posing as an enemy. “The idea is that as smart as we make computer AI, human [intelligence] is still more unpredictable and might be able to come up with more clever tactics than what we can come up with,” Miller says. “You might run into an area where there are three enemies and you won't know that one of them is controlled by a human. Suddenly

this human-controlled opponent might start doing things that are totally unpredictable based on how you've seen these enemies react before.” You can go after specific friends or just jump into a general queue that will drop you into a random game instantly as a Stalker. Players can only enter parts of the game that they've already beaten themselves, and will earn Achievements and Home trophies for taking down heroes. After dying as a Stalker, you'll be thrown into another person's game in what will hopefully be a smooth transition. Up to two Stalkers at a time will only be able to encroach on certain areas of a player's game so you don't have to worry about people interfering with key story scenes or boss battles. Plus, you can just turn the Stalker feature off if you'd like. Standard multiplayer deathmatch modes will also be available, pitting survivors against spore-

infected enemies, though we don't know much more than that at this point. Recoil and 3D Realms admit that they're talking about Earth No More a little earlier than the industry standard, but it's all part of the plan. “Most games probably announce with 18 months of release I imagine, at the worst two years. We're announcing this I guess maybe a year early, but I'm not really too worried about

interesting human drama emerges,” says creative director Raphael van Lierop. “The disasters are what define the visceral elements of the experience—the vibe and aesthetics. But really, the

stories are about how people deal with the ramifications of these disasters, because these are drastic situations quite far removed from what we face in our daily existence (hopefully), and as a result we can amplify emotions and conflict.”

The group dynamics ripomatics feature five primary themes that seem to surface in every disaster movie. 1) Foreshadowing: the cast first discovers that something is wrong, but can't quite put their finger on it 2) Analysis: next, they try to make sense of the extreme situation they find themselves in 3) High Tension: extreme stress causes fights within the team 4) Hard Decisions: high pressure forces cast members to make difficult choices like the scene in *28 Days Later* where Frank gets a drip of infected blood in his eye and must be killed in front of his daughter 5) The Plan: the cast finally knows what they're dealing with and must now figure out a way to eliminate the threat.

After viewing clips of these classics cut together in these categories, it's clear that Earth No More's writers have their work cut out for them. But it is exciting to see the bar set this high for gaming dialogue and plotting.



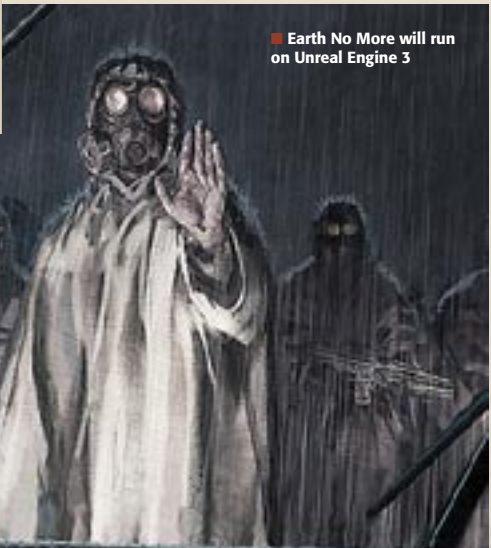
■ Early effects of the spore...



■ ... and just a little bit later



■ Expect to see plenty of national landmarks throughout the course of the game



■ Earth No More will run on Unreal Engine 3



■ It takes plenty of cooperation with your AI teammates to make it through the spore-infested streets