

Hi-Rez Studios Interview



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Todd Harris of Hi-Rez Studios chats with Computer Games Magazine about their new game development studio that is currently working on a new MMO title.

New game developers seem to form every week but a new Atlanta based company called Hi-Rez Studios already has some experience in making software and technology for other non-game businesses. The company is currently working on their first title, an unannounced MMO game and Computer Games Magazine got a chance to chat with Hi-Rez's vice-president Todd Harris to learn more about the company.

Computer Games - First, how did Hi-Rez Studios come to be formed?

Todd Harris - We are enthusiastic gamers and I think the seed was planted over twenty years ago when our company founder, Erez Goren, wrote his first game for the Atari 2600. Around that same time, I was applying to college and included with my application a game I had written for the PC; I thought my game might impress Admissions more than my essay responses.

However, after those initial developments, our professional lives revolved around technology and software but not games. Erez started a number of companies including Radiant Systems and BlueCube Software, both now leading providers of technology solutions to the retail industry. I managed much of the software development activity at these companies. Earlier this year, Erez decided to turn his gaming hobby into yet another business. His success with prior start-ups afforded him the ability to start the studio and he decided to leave the day-to-day management of BlueCube Software. For me, an opportunity to produce games rather than enterprise business software was an easy decision.

Computer Games - How was Hi-Rez Studios picked as the name of the company?

Todd Harris - Hi-Rez, short for Hi-Resolution of course, relates to "images of the finest sharpness, detail and quality." As the name implies, our goal is to create games at that highest level of quality in terms of both graphics and game-play.

Computer Games - It seems like the Atlanta area is now exploding with a number of new game developers. Why do you think the Atlanta area is becoming more popular with teams creating games?

Todd Harris - Atlanta has a growing pool of digital media talent and resources. Just this year Georgia Tech announced a new degree in Computational Media as well as a very unique PhD in Digital Media. Similarly institutions such as the Savannah College of Art & Design and the Art Institute of Atlanta continue to refine their curriculum in support of game development. Of course, Atlanta is already well established as a center for digital media broadcasting with Turner (CNN, Cartoon Network, etc) being located here.

So, given a pool of smart technical folks, talented and trained artists, other digital media industry plus great climate and affordable office space & housing I think we'll continue to see new studios and games from Atlanta.

Computer Games - What is the team's philosophy in making its games?

Todd Harris - "A minute to learn; a lifetime to master." That dictum is somewhat cliché for any good game yet many recent computer games, particularly in the MMO space, seem to take the exact opposite approach. It is a challenge to make a game that remains fun and interesting without being overly complicated but that is our goal.

Computer Games - How hard or easy has it been to establish Hi-Rez Studios so far?

Todd Harris - In many ways we are in a fortunate position. We have the financial and managerial resources to provide stability, a professional work environment, great facilities and benefits, while offering the excitement and feel of a startup.

The challenge for us is re-learning the games industry. A lot has changed since our last game... Did you know they don't use sprites anymore!?! . However, we have received great support from the Atlanta community and other game companies. Events like the Game Developers Conference allow a new entrant to very quickly get exposed to the industry.

Computer Games - What can you tell us at this point about the first game that the studio will make?

Todd Harris - Our first title will be a massively multiplayer online game (MMO). And our technology, tool-set and art pipeline are being designed from the ground-up to support cutting edge visuals on next-generation hardware.

Computer Games - There are a number of massively multiplayer games currently out. Without going into a lot of detail, is Hi-Rez Studios confident that their first game project will stand out from the crowd?

Todd Harris - It is still too early for us to talk about our specific theme and core game-play elements. However we are confident that nothing like it exists today. Our entire team logs a LOT of time with MMOs. When we are not writing our own we are playing others. And we enjoy playing many of the leading titles. At the same time we believe that the market for MMOs will continue to grow and that we have something very unique to offer.

Computer Games - Is Hi-Rez Studios currently hiring staff members and if so what positions are open?

Todd Harris - Yes. We have immediate openings and welcome resumes and portfolios from artists and level designers. Our specific position requirements are detailed on www.hirezstudios.com

Computer Games - When do you expect to reveal more info on the game itself? Perhaps at E3?

Todd Harris - This year at E3 we just want to observe and learn. At next year's E3 we get to reveal.

Computer Games - Finally is there anything else you wish to say about Hi-Rez Studios and its plans for the future?

Todd Harris - Any studio considering MMO development needs to consider the unglamorous but very real challenges around: establishing more rigorous software engineering and quality practices for large team development, engineering scalable server architecture, maintaining hosted production servers and minimizing user downtime, managing a live team, customer support, etc.

These areas are outside the expertise of most game companies and rightly intimidate some; but they are actually core competencies of Hi-Rez Studios because of our business software background. Our technical team has the experience from BlueCube Software of serving Fortune 100 clients with very demanding quality standards and delivering those clients software updates to hosting centers across three continents, scaling server clusters as client count increases, and delivering quality customer support.

We've been doing all that back-end stuff for a while and so are we now thrilled to be working on a compelling game on the front-end. But we'll save details on that for another time...

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