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PagodaWest Games: Remote Working Works

Jenn Ngo

Something epic this way is coming to mobile gaming. There’s a new hero for the mobile world, and he was born in Portland, Oregon—and London, UK. Major Magnet is the namesake hero of PagodaWest Games’ debut project, a mobile game of magnetic appeal. PagodaWest Games is a start-up game development company founded by both Jared Kasl, of Portland, and Tom Fry, of London.

All art and animations for the game are created by award-winning graphic artist and art director, Tom Fry, in London; all code is written and compiled near Portland by lead game programmer, Khoa Ngo; the soundtrack and sound effects are brought to life by multi-talented composer, Tiago Lopes, in Newark, New Jersey; and the entire process is overseen by game design director, Jared Kasl, in Portland. Together, these four members create a remote working team, in which their time and talents span borders and time zones, bringing together the best and the brightest for the common purpose of “[making] games the way they should be [made].”

Co-founders Kasl and Fry met working on another remote working team, a fan-made HD update of the classic Sonic the Hedgehog 2. Down the road it was decided that could go on and start by making mobile games off our own backs. Kasl added that, “it also helped that we both have an extremely similar love for the old arcade era of gaming”. So, two with a common goal founded what is today known as PagodaWest Games, a small start-up game development team, based in Portland, Oregon, and London, England.

As with any project, it takes more than ideas to make something happen. A programmer was needed. Enter PagodaWest’s third employee, Khoa Ngo. Fry and Kasl already being so close as friends, had an idea of what they wanted—“we were very picky when choosing a programmer as it’s important to us to be able to ‘have a laugh’ as well as to get things done,” Kasl said. Ngo, a resident of the Portland metro area, fit the bill not only personality and skill-wise, but by geographical location as well. Ngo said, “me being within a short drive away from Jared was a hiring point. Having the option to meet in person, if only just to talk alongside using hand ges-

1 http://www.pagodawestgames.com/games
2 http://www.pagodawestgames.com/about
3 Ngo is currently in a contract position.
4 Lopes is currently in a contract position.
5 http://www.pagodawestgames.com/
tures can make a world of difference when trying to explain something.”
That being said, one of the greatest challenges PagodaWest, and probably any other remote working team, faces is inevitable miscommunications. Not always being able to be in the same place forces a high level of specificity when trying to get across difficult or new concepts. Kasl says, “as we were developing gameplay mechanics there were a few times where [meeting in person with Ngo] was necessary. I think as we've all become more in tune with each other, that need has slowly vanquished". The benefits of having a small, close-knit team does allow the members to get to the same wavelengths of thought—“disclaimer: not brainwashing,” Fry added, tongue in cheek.

How do the many parts that make up a game come into fruition with team members so far apart? For that, you can thank not only years of expertise, but a host of carefully-chosen programs, software, and a decent Internet connection.

There are many tools that have come into use in order to make the process what Fry describes as ‘streamlined and seamless’ as possible. Over the years, through a lot of trial and error, Fry and Kasl have come to settle on a specific set of software, which serves as the team’s very own ‘virtual office space’. The keys to PagodaWest’s successful and efficient ‘virtual office space’ are: daily communication via conference calls on Skype, Dropbox for file sharing, a private forum set up to help organize information and task lists, and the occasional use of iDroo, a software program used as a whiteboard for brainstorming and quickly sketching out ideas for everyone else on the team can view and contribute to in real time.

Skype, an instant messaging and calling service, is used for daily voice conference, as well as to share links over the instant message feature, which are saved in the chat history for future access. The members of PagodaWest sign into a conference call at the start of every workday, also an efficient method for logging hours worked. Dropbox, an online file-sharing and storage space, is used by all members of the team in order to share game assets, such as art, music, documentation, code, and builds. Dropbox users can synch their accounts in order to share files in a drag-and-drop manner, or to access their files stored online from any computer.

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6 In Fry’s words.
8 [https://www.dropbox.com/](https://www.dropbox.com/)
10 A ‘build’ is a complete copy of the game, with all assets compiled together so that it can be played and tested.
It also makes for decent source control software, allowing members to access back-ups of files in case an earlier version are needed should any current working files be compromised.

Also, on the development side of things the team uses Ansca’s Corona SDK, a popular software development kit for creating mobile games for iOS and Android platforms. Corona uses a scripting language, Lua, which is an increasingly popular language for writing video games. Both the Corona SDK and Lua have extensive documentation in online forums, where developers from around the world can post tutorials and discussions about the code for one another’s benefit.

The collaborative nature of each of these tools is well-suited to the remote working team. Since team members can’t all be in the same office—or even time zone—at once, proper management of time and tools gets the job done.

Though for most purposes the Internet offers a sort of anonymity or distance, that cannot be the case with a team working together to complete such a large scale project. It is very important that not just work ethics, but personalities mesh as well. It is critical to the dynamic of the team and to the end product. Daily conference calls via Skype not only serve as a convenient method to communicate while working—personalities are able to come through more easily when tones of voice can be heard. This allows team members to get to know one another better and have a laugh while on the job. Fry said, “we all share a tight bond and that’s important as it ties directly into the quality of our product.”

In the future, should Major Magnet really take off, there are plans to expand into a physical office space (including moving Fry to the United States), as it would be too difficult and time consuming to continue in a remote working situation as PagodaWest grows. For the time being however, Fry calls the current arrangement, “a modern-day way of working”—and work, it does!

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In the near future upon release of their game, the team plans to support Major Magnet as much as possible, keeping it relevant to the public by continuing to release patches to fix any bugs that players may encounter, as well as adding more levels to play. Fry says, “We know we have a great product on our hands and in the end the success can only be driven by our own drive to make sure it gets into the hands of the player.”

Major Magnet is slated to be released to both iOS and Android markets during the second quarter of this year (Q2 2012). For more information, and to keep an eye on this promising new team, check out their website, Twitter feed, and Facebook page.

12 http://www.pagodawestgames.com/
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