

Q&A with Eric Zimmerman

New York is a global creative hub, home to an unmatched number of creative people and scores of businesses in industries from film to advertising. But where does New York stand when it comes to the video game industry, one of the nation's fastest growing creative fields? To find out, the Center for an Urban Future's Jonathan Bowles sat down with Eric Zimmerman, CEO and co-founder of Tribeca-based Gamelab, the city's largest game development studio.

Jonathan Bowles: Tell me about Gamelab.

Eric Zimmerman: Gamelab is a game development company that's based here in Tribeca. We have about 35 people on staff. We're 6-and-a-half years old. 35 people isn't that large for a game development company, but for New York City it's big, and we are, as far as I know, the largest game studio in the city. There are other game-related companies here—publishers like Atari and Take 2 Interactive, and other companies doing game-related work, like VH-1 and Scholastic. But in terms of a dedicated game creation studio, we're the largest one in New York City.

JB: How did it get started?

EZ: I started Gamelab with Peter Lee after having worked in the industry for about 6 or 7 years. Peter and I collaborated with Michael Sweet, who runs a digital audio company here in New York, on a small independent game that we entered into a contest at the game developer's conference. It won awards and a publisher wanted to purchase the game. And that's what allowed us to open our offices and get the company up and running. No one ever invested in us. We've always lived off the fruits of our labors.

JB: Does Gamelab have a particular niche in the industry?

EZ: We're a little bit like an independent filmmaker in games. As opposed to the mainstream game companies, which are spending \$10 to \$20 million making huge games for Xbox 360 and Playstation 2, we're working on a much smaller scale. Our games have much smaller budgets. They're generally designed for the Internet or are distributed over the Internet. But being small gives us more freedom to experiment. We're very focused on innovation. That might mean finding new audiences that wouldn't ordinarily play a game, creating a game for a context you wouldn't think of having games, finding new kinds of visual and audio aesthetics for games, or having new kinds of narrative or cultural content in our games. We make games sometimes for children, sometimes for adults, sometimes for entertainment, sometimes for education, and we make games both on and off the computer. But most of our work is on-line games.

JB: Could you describe one of your games.

EZ: Our most successful game recently was called Diner Dash. That was a downloadable game, or what is sometimes referred to as a casual game. It was a game that you can find on sites like YahooGames and Microsoft's Gaming Zone—game portals where tens of millions of people go to play games online. Diner Dash has unusual content for a video game. It's about an executive

who quits her job and becomes a restaurateur. In the game, you are opening up restaurants and improving them. The game play is serving customers and keeping them happy. Last year it was the most popular game in our little corner of the game industry, the downloadable game industry, according to our publisher.

JB: Would you say you're more of a creative company, a high-tech firm, or a little of both?

EZ: Our staff is about one-third programmers, who are really hard-core focused on the technical elements; one third visual designers, which includes character designers, graphic designers, animators, illustrators and art production people; and about a third split between game design and project management. In one sense, we are developing software. We have to stay disciplined or products can have technical problems. On the other hand, we're not making word processing software. If the game isn't fun to play, we've failed. And that you don't always get right the first time. Once we start on a project, we quickly make a prototype, to begin exploring if it is fun to play. So you don't just plan out a game in advance and execute it. It evolves as it is created.

JB: It seems like video games are almost as big as films these days. Am I right to assume this is a fast-growing industry?

EZ: It is. There was a statistic quoted a few years ago that the game industry is bigger than Hollywood. It wasn't really true. It was taking the entire game industry internationally, including the sales of hardware, compared just to Hollywood box office receipts. But, that aside, it's clear that video games are definitely a major mass medium now, on the scale of film, if not quite that large. It's rapidly growing. People are spending more time in front of their computers. Games are not just for geeky young males anymore. In the generation growing up now, everyone is playing games. It's simply part of the landscape of how people spend their leisure time. Young people today may not be hard core gamers, but they're not unfamiliar with games.

JB: Does New York City have a video game industry?

EZ: It does and it doesn't. New York City is not a center for the video game industry. Cities that are centers are San Francisco, Los Angeles, Seattle and other cities like Austin and Dallas. Other places have more game development going on, like Boston, for example. New York City, for whatever reason, has a relatively small development community. There's probably more game development going on in New Jersey than in New York City.

JB: Roughly how many game companies are based here?

EZ: There's probably a couple dozen game studios and another couple dozen that are working with games in some way. There are lots of ways to be in the game industry. For example, Massive, a company that was recently bought by Microsoft, places ads in games. They're based here in New York City. All the major ad agencies now have interactive divisions or people who do game-related work. They're making games, too—what are called adver-games.

JB: New York is home to so many other creative businesses. Why do you think New York hasn't developed more of a game industry?

EZ: If you look to the other big cities that are centers, usually there is a strong technical culture there. Like in San Francisco, games developed around Silicon Valley. Or you simply have a large, very successful game company. For example, in Austin, you have Origin, an early game company that became huge. People could work there for several years and leave Origin and start their own companies. And suddenly you have a whole ecosystem of people making games. In

Seattle, of course, you have Microsoft and Nintendo of America, which is headquartered there. So you can work at Microsoft for a while, make games there or learn how to develop software, and then create your own company. In New York City, that never quite happened. There never was a large, successful game development company. Also, although there are a lot of universities here, there's not a really sterling technical school. There's no MIT or Cal Tech in New York. I don't mean to disparage the New York City universities, because we get really great students from NYU and Columbia and Brooklyn Polytechnic that have studied programming. But there's no really nationally known technical program where there are people coming out with really strong computer science degrees. That may be a contributing factor as well.

JB: Is there potential for growth in New York's game industry?

EZ: There's a lot of potential. There are some publishers here and a lot of content companies here. The game companies in New York City are generally small. They're generally doing web games or cell phone games, trying out on-line business models. And some of the best game-related graduate programs are here in New York City. Parsons School of Design, I think, is the first institution to have a graduate and an undergraduate program in game design. Also, NYU has its Interactive Telecommunications Program, and we've gotten a lot of students from there. We have some of the best art schools in the country here, like School of Visual Arts and Parsons School of Design. We get graduates from those schools who are incredibly talented at illustration and animation. So there's a lot to be said for New York City as a place to make games.

JB: So what happens now to students who graduate from game programs in New York? Do they leave New York?

EZ: A lot of them stay here and try to find other jobs. But many of them just move out to the west coast. The jobs aren't here. On the west coast, you have Electronic Arts, the biggest games publisher, employing thousands of people in different offices around San Francisco and Silicon Valley. In Seattle, there are many companies large and small.

JB: What would it take for New York to develop a larger game industry?

EZ: What New York's never had is a really large game development studio—employing 100 to 300 people—where you could graduate from school and know that there are places where you can find some sort of job. You could start out testing games or doing marketing for them, and maybe make your way into developing games after a few months. There's no company like that in New York. What would it take to make a company like that? It'd probably really take a real investment on the part of the city for people to open up shop here.

JB: Do you have any suggestions for city officials?

EZ: I gave a keynote talk at the Montreal international games summit last year. Because I was a speaker, I was invited to a special dinner that was hosted by the Montreal and the Quebec chambers of commerce. It was a lavish dinner at some restored castle, and it was all about them telling us what a great city Montreal was and why we should think about opening a studio there. And even when I said to them that we have a little company, they said: 'well think about how you might work with companies here.' It just showed me that they have a real commitment. Now, Montreal has the largest game development studio in the world—Ubisoft—and several other game development studios. Those are bringing in lots of jobs—technical jobs and skilled jobs in the entertainment industry that are not going to go away. These officials from Montreal go to the major game conferences, they stay on top of what's going on in the games industry, and

it's really paid off for them. I don't see anything like that in New York City. I don't see any kind of initiative from the government to help subsidize what we do or to try to and attract talent. The idea is not to turn New York into Montreal and have these huge studios, but to build on what's unique about the existing game culture here—more independent games, smaller game studios, web and mobile games, game scholarship and research and serious games.

JB: As an entrepreneur, is New York a tough place to do business?

EZ: I really like doing business in New York City. Because we make culture—pop culture—the cultural diversity of the city and the cultural sophistication of the inhabitants of this city have been big pluses for us. We've benefited from being in the place that's the nexus of music and fashion and visual design and the arts and entertainment. All of these things really impact what we do. New York City is expensive, but I don't think it's more expensive than other large cities.

JB: Do you have any concerns about New York as a place to do business?

EZ: One thing that does concern me is the increasing gentrification of New York City, which can have a dampening effect on innovative culture. The gentrification is happening more and more rapidly. I've lived in New York now for about 13 years, and I saw it happen to the East Village and the Lower East Side and now Williamsburg, and it seems like it's accelerating. As a game company, we have one foot with the mainstream entertainment industry. We work with Yahoo and Mattel and Lego, the biggest companies in entertainment. We also have one foot in the experimental, underground, independent realm too. We want to have both. New York City is really one of the few places that you can have both of that. Whatever is going to foster and maintain that balance, without slipping too far to one side or the other, is really important for the city.

JB: What's next for Gamelab?

EZ: A lot of what Gamelab is trying to do is trying to think about the emerging audience in games. We feel like there's a huge untapped audience that are not casual gamers, and not hard core gamers. There's a huge audience in the middle that we feel is totally underserved. Those are people in their 20s and 30s. They're looking for interesting, hip stylish popular culture. They don't want to spend huge amounts of time playing games, but they're open to games. It's hard to get games to those people, because the casual game websites are really focused on the older casual gamer demographics and the retail outlets are really focusing on hard-core gamers. We feel like the online distribution sites aren't quite there yet to reach those people, but that's really what we want to do. We also recently received a first-of-a-kind MacArthur Foundation grant to do a three year research project in collaboration with the University of Wisconsin Madison. That is part of MacArthur's media literacy initiative. The product is a piece of software that will teach game design to junior high school and high school students by letting them create and modify simple games. Our project is not about creating a game to teach you something, such as to teach you chemistry. Instead, it's founded on the principle that playing and understanding and creating games itself is a form of media literacy. Game design incorporates everything from mathematics and logic to aesthetics and storytelling to understanding human emotion and psychology to understanding how pop culture operates.

For more information about Gamelab and Eric Zimmerman, please go to www.gamelab.com.