

# MIDLAND OF HOPE AND GLORY

As well as being the UK's geographical centre, the Midlands has long played its part at the core of the country's development community. Eager to learn about how developers in the region plan to maintain momentum in the industry, **Ed Fear** and **Will Freeman** sat down with some of the studio heads leading the charge...



**What are the benefits for those establishing a development house in the Midlands, in a place so far removed from the country's biggest cities?**

**Simon Phillips:** I think it's a double-edged sword really.

The obvious downside is not being in a big city, aside from being near Birmingham, so it's harder to attract the younger post-graduate talent who want to be in the hubbub of things and not in a field with cows in Bloxham.

But it is that which is the best thing about being around here; we have lots of rural environments like this where the more mature people in the games industry who want more of a chilled-out lifestyle can settle down and blend in with their family life.

From that point of view, then this area has a lot to offer that big cities don't. That's one of the key perks, so you get a lot of experienced staff up here.

**Simon Prytherch:** At the same time, large cities are very accessible from here, and we have some of the best universities in Oxford, and twenty minutes down the line we've got Warwick University up near Leamington. That's very good for recruitment as both of those areas are renowned centres: one for students and academia, and the other, Leamington, being great for development studios.

**Phillips:** Exactly. It's an hour from here to everywhere.

**Paul Smith:** It is a great place to live, and

**“What we don't have in the Midlands is a regional organisational body for the industry like Game Republic or GameHorizon in the north.”**

there's a lot of talent in the area. Where we are we've also got Derby, where there's a cluster of big game studios. If you're going to set up a new studio, you go to where the raw materials are. There's lots of people to tap into, and there's just great countryside. I used to work in London, and I don't miss it.

**So the quiet nature of the region is definitely an asset that attracts more experienced talent?**

**Phillips:** Absolutely. It's got that 'settle-down-appeal'. And also, because of that, you know that when somebody moves into the area

## WHO'S WHO



**Paul Smith**  
MD, Strawdog Studios

Focused on creating and nurturing its own IP, Strawdog was formed in 2003 and initially focused on contract work before stepping out on its own projects.



**Simon Prytherch,**  
CEO, Lightning Fish

Banbury-based Lightning Fish specialises in family-orientated titles like its *NewU* fitness game.



**Simon Phillips,**  
MD, Gusto Games

Formed in the wake of Silicon Dreams' demise, Gusto makes sports games for most formats.



**Graeme Monk**  
MD, Eiconic

Focused on smaller projects for PC and console, Eiconic's latest release is the Gametrak-using *SqueeBall Party*.



and settles down with their family they are in it for keeps. It's not a case of them working at a place they can get to on a tube, doing it for six months and seeing how it goes, before moving somewhere else.

**Graeme Monk:** The industry has got ten to fifteen years older too, which is something the area can take advantage of. We're all that much older, with families and various other things, so if you don't want to work in London, it's nice and chilled.

**Prytherch:** I find it an advantage for international recruiting as well, because this area offers a quintessential British image, and it's outside of London. So if people have come from a rural area or have had enough of

#### calibre employees easier?

**Smith:** We're finding that in Derby the university is very, very strong on programming, and there's a lot of great students coming through. In fact we take on three or four a year through placements, and some stick with us.

**Phillips:** Maybe it's a bit different with the arts side. There things are lagging slightly, with the very specific skills they need to learn, although they are beginning to catch up. Of course I can only speak for my area of the Midlands. In general though, we are very pleased with what we can see.

**Prytherch:** Also, on the programming side, both Oxford and Warwick University have got some of the best computer science courses, but that means it is very hard to compete against all the other industries to get those graduates. We've found that by working with the universities we are getting some more of those now – not necessarily people just finishing their degree courses, but those doing research and masters and PhDs are easy to make contact with here, and we're interested in some of their research.

**Monk:** I think there should be more initiatives here like Dare to be Digital as well. When you've got students actually starting to work together as a team on a particular project, and they actually deliver something at the end of it, it's a really good platform for people trying to get into the industry. I've employed three or four people who have been involved with Dare to be Digital, and you can actually see the kind of quality of gameplay that they can put together. Again, there needs to be more of those kinds of things here.

#### Do you feel staff sharing schemes have a place in bringing together the Midlands developer community?

**Smith:** Just the phrase 'staff sharing' scares the living daylights out of me.

**Prytherch:** But put it another way, as 'collaboration'. I think collaboration is really important for smaller developers to grow. If you want to move up a level there are ways of doing that by working with other people who might have different skills to you.

What we don't have in the Midlands, which I think is a shame, is an organisational body for the industry in the region. That's partly

due to there being no Government funding for the Midlands area, or very little. You get things like Game Republic, or GameHorizon in the north, but nothing here. That's something I definitely want to change.

**Smith:** It just hasn't happened in the Midlands yet. Whether it will or not I don't know, but because we're so dispersed, and the Midlands is such a huge area, it's difficult to define where it begins and ends.

**Phillips:** If we're sat here wondering why one hasn't been set up perhaps that's something we should all talk about. The thing is, with collaboration, it needs to be very well communicated and very well set up to work efficiently, because somebody always has an edge or angle.

**Monk:** There's got to be a lot of trust between the different studios as well, because one of the biggest things is confidentiality between projects. If you're going to outsource to somebody else, you want to be careful about what they've got in development in-house. Ideas get shared, and quite often ideas get nicked as well.

**Prytherch:** And you probably have to go to certain people because they are specialists in that area, and therefore are going to be doing something similar to you. So I think it is a case of having it legally defined and keeping things separate. I'm on the advisory board for GameHorizon, and I've seen how it works in that region. I'd say that the biggest advantage of that organisation is the networking and collaboration. And that's for all studios – not just the small ones. For example, Eutechnyx get the smaller studios to help them on some of their larger projects, giving those studios the experience to get to the next level.

**Smith:** There needs to be something in this region to be honest.

**Monk:** When I was working down in Oxford, a lot of the Oxford developers would get together and just chat about things, and it was a really good forum to discuss problems that you were having with projects, or a particular approach you were taking to a project. I think that is potentially what's missing from the Midlands. It is almost as if we need a TIGA Midlands chapter, which would benefit us all.

*From left to right:  
Graeme Monk, Paul  
Smith, Simon Phillips  
and Simon Prytherch*

**“ This region easily has a headcount of developers greater than that in London. We've got around 2,000 just in areas like Leamington Spa and Oxford. ”**

city life, perhaps living in Paris or Helsinki, then they can come here and think 'this is exactly how I envisage England to be'.

**Smith:** And, it's funny, because I'm surprised by how many people who work in this area were actually born around here. Also, there are some universities offering some great courses that can retain a lot of people in the area, and some big studios like Eurocom and Rare down the road, that are attractive to people.

**Prytherch:** In fact, I was doing a quick mental count of all the people employed in the games industry in the Midlands and I'd probably say that we've got, in terms of head count, more than any other region – even London. I think we've easily got a headcount of over 2,000 just looking locally, going as far as the Leamington and Oxford areas.

**So are the universities in the area something that makes recruiting high**

## EICONIC

### STATS

**Number of staff:** 5, plus contract staff

**Year founded:** 2006

**Location:** Various, distributed development around the Midlands, but primarily based in High Wycombe.

#### Key staff:

Graeme Monk (MD/Executive Producer)  
Dave Pollard (Lead Games Programmer)  
James Boulton (Technical Director)  
Neill Jones (Creative Producer)  
Simon Credland (Art Director)

#### Previous projects:

*SqueeBalls* (Oct 2009), *Polar Panic* (Sept 2009)

#### Currently working on:

TBA



EICONIC IS one of the growing group of distributed developers, having no fixed abode but all collaborating remotely. Its founders came from the Oxford studio of LEGO iterators Traveller's Tales. After working on *Crash: Twinsanity* and *Super Monkey Ball Adventures*, they left in 2006 to start Eiconic.

Since then, the team has been working with Performance Designed Productions producing *SqueeBalls* for its Xbox 360 Freedom motion controller, which was recently announced at E3. It's also hard at work on an Xbox Live Arcade and PlayStation Network title *Polar Panic* on off-moments. The studio aims to release the latter this year.

"We're a core team of dedicated professionals who concentrate on small to medium projects," explains managing director Graeme Monk. "We much prefer the shorter turn-around of projects lasting up to 12 months."

What really separates Eiconic is the 'virtual studio' approach, however. Staff work from home, using established communication software like Skype and Google Talk – and its proprietary technology Moai has been specifically designed to work on a remote server.

"It was necessary that all of our tools, assets and production pipeline could work remotely and from anywhere in the world," explains Monk. "Every member of staff works on live data and the latest code, and clients have access to the same data and pipeline. If we want feedback on an issue, asset or gameplay mechanic we can inform the client, who can update and build the data on their end in less than ten minutes."

The system works well for the team, who still meet up every few weeks but can have Scrum production meetings daily. They also try to keep to standard working day hours, but can be flexible – and this, coupled with the lack of stress that comes from no commute, makes production "very relaxed, and increases the creativity that we have," says Monk.

In fact, they're so confident with the distributed model that they think other studios will follow suit in time: "We firmly believe that distributed development will become more and more commonplace over the next few years. When we set up with this philosophy, people said that we were mad, and that we wouldn't survive. We're now in a position where we've proven that it works and that our philosophy is sound – we're still alive and kicking, and looking to expand."

### CONTACT

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## LIGHTNING FISH GAMES

### STATS

**Number of staff:** 12

**Year founded:** 2008

**Location:** Banbury

#### Key staff:

Simon Prytherch (CEO)  
Mike Montgomery (Development Director)  
David Hunt (Chief Technology Officer)  
Phil Marley (Creative Director)  
Nicola Salmoria (Senior Programmer)

#### Previous projects:

N/A

#### Currently working on:

*NewU Fitness First Personal Trainer*, further *NewU* products, plus unannounced title



LIGHTNING FISH is the youngest of all the developers featured here, having been set up only last year – but the firm is already set to release its first retail product this September, the fitness title *NewU Fitness First Personal Trainer*.

Set up by industry veterans Simon Prytherch, Mike Montgomery and David Hunt – who have more than 60 years of experience between them – Lightning Fish is targeting a different type of gamer than the traditional core user: families, and specifically the growing number of people using game consoles as fitness devices. Shortly after its inception it signed a deal with Black Bean to develop *NewU*, for which it worked closely with fitness chain Fitness First and (non-)Dr. Gillian McKeith's 'You Are What You Eat' company, to ensure the game had a solid fitness and nutritional grounding.

"Our studio mission is to develop family-oriented games that have a positive effect on your life through social interaction," says founder Simon Prytherch.

"When designing games we consider the consumer first. This means we often come up with novel approaches that are not always the acknowledged approach. For example, *NewU* is gathering attention because we decided to feature real video-based characters rather than computer generated avatars: the audience for fitness titles is much more comfortable with a real person, and this is proving to break down barriers."

To this end, Lightning Fish has its own studio for video shooting, which it intends to leverage for all of its future titles. "Our proprietary technology is in the areas of motion tracking and video/graphic integration," says Prytherch. "It enables us to achieve excellent motion tracking and custom video editing. This was initially all developed for the Wii, but we are now developing versions for Xbox 360, PlayStation 3 and PC."

Lightning Fish believes in the power of small teams – which will always be ten members or less, says Prytherch – because it believes it to be the most efficient way of developing games. "It also means that every team member knows each other, and everyone has a say in the direction and design of the products," he explains. And while there may only be one product team at the moment, it is currently staffing up for a second team, and is poised to announce further family titles in the next few months.

### CONTACT

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