



encore

Southwest Michigan's Magazine



Search

Features

Up Front

Good Works

Savor

Enterprise

Arts

Back Story

HOME / FEATURES / GAME MAKERS

Features

Game Makers

Rival video game companies coexist peacefully in Kalamazoo

AUTHOR: ANDREW DOMINO

DATE: FEB 25, 2016



Employees at S2, often convene in the company's Creative Collaboration Room to work on games or play games. From right, Michael Kirzinger, CEO Marc DeForest, Jason Gripp and Stephen Baker talk about the company's latest game in development.



It started with one.

In 2010, S2 Games, a Kalamazoo-based video game company led by Marc DeForest, created the multiplayer computer game *Heroes of Newerth (HoN)*. The game developed a large global following but did something else that not even DeForest could have predicted: It spawned two more video game

companies — Frostburn Studios and Plarium Michigan Studio — that now call the greater Kalamazoo area home.

So how did it happen that a Midwestern town far from Silicon Valley and all things technology would become a small hub of video game development?

To answer that, start with S2.

For four years after creating *HoN*, S2 was a growing company, notable locally for its giant gorilla logo emblazoned on billboards across the city. Then, in the spring of 2015, S2 sold *Heroes of Newerth* to Garena, a Singapore-based company, to concentrate on its newest game, *Strife*, and another game still in development.

But instead of being relocated to Singapore, *HoN* continued to be overseen in Kalamazoo by Frostburn Studios, a new company created by Garena and composed of about 45 former S2 employees who made the move with *HoN*. Frostburn Studios set up shop on Water Street in downtown Kalamazoo, while S2 left its longtime location in Portage for new digs on Beatrice Drive, near Ninth Street and I-94. S2 also has offices in Petaluma, California.

In January 2015, three S2 veterans left S2 to open Plarium Michigan Studio in Portage, the first U.S. location for Israel-based Plarium Games. Plarium Michigan's nine-member team provides "project strategy and game design expertise" in daily video conferences with other Plarium groups in Russia and Ukraine, says James Fielding, Plarium Michigan's president and game director.

That makes three companies — S2, Frostburn and Plarium — with similar games and similar audiences coexisting in the Kalamazoo region. But, according to Frostburn Studios' Brad Bower, there is more collegiality among the three companies than competition.

"We are competitors, but a lot of people know one another from working at S2," says Bower, the studio director at Frostburn.

MOBA and MMO games

The games produced by these local companies, including *Plarium's Sparta: War of Empires* and *Total Domination*, are multiplayer games but of two different types.

HoN and *Strife* are multiplayer online battle arena games (MOBAs) played on computers. Players log in to a game and choose a hero, usually a fantasy character like a wizard or swordsman, and form a team with other players. Each team faces off against a rival team to conquer the rival team's base while defending its own home base. It's a little like the playground game Capture the Flag, except all the players are on computers and the digital heroes can use magical powers.

In MOBAs, only two teams compete against each other and each team is made up of five heroes, who each have different abilities, such as attacking from a distance or healing injuries. Heroes can't wander

off and do something else; they have to help their teammates get to the opposing team's base. Dedicated players spend hours playing the game, and there are strategy guides online written by fans that analyze everything a character in the game can do.

HoN and *Strife* are both free to play; all a gamer has to do is download a game from the official website. Players can make in-game purchases, paying for upgrades and improvements such as new clothing or equipment for their heroes. Players use real money for these purchases, but the companies wouldn't reveal how much they earn annually from in-game sales.

MOBAs like *HoN* and *Strife* are a major part of "e-sports," organized tournaments of computer games. The gaming industry research firm Newzoo expects e-sports to double its worldwide revenue to \$500 million by 2017 and to \$1 billion by 2020. A recent *HoN* tournament offered \$180,000 in prize money to the top gamers. E-sports are especially popular in Asia, and Bower says *HoN* is the single biggest game in Thailand.

Plarium's games aren't MOBAs, but they're similar: They're massively multiplayer online games, or MMOs. In MMOs, thousands of participants can play the game simultaneously over the Internet. Plarium's games tend to feature fantasy characters such as Vikings and pirates who march across computerized battlefields to war with other players. Like *HoN* and *Strife*, Plarium's games are free to play, with in-game purchases available to enhance a player's abilities.

S2 wouldn't release player information, but Frostburn reports that about 1.6 million people play *HoN* each month. Plarium has more than 90 million players for 11 different games.

Spawned from *HoN*

Heroes of Newerth undoubtedly is at the root of video game development in the Kalamazoo area. Soon after *HoN* was introduced, S2 Games partnered with Garena to offer the game throughout Asia. Once *HoN* became an established brand, S2 decided to work on a smaller, simpler game that would introduce new players to MOBAs. That game, *Strife*, was launched in 2014, originally to complement *HoN* and take players from one game to the next.

Marc DeForest, founder of S2 Games, led the teams that created both *HoN* and *Strife*. He said having two similar but distinct games was always S2's goal.

"When we created *Strife*, we wanted to take everything we learned from making games over the previous 10 years and create a new game from a clean sheet," DeForest says. "*Strife* is more forgiving and less hard-core than *Heroes*. The games can and do co-exist in the market."

In May 2015, S2 sold *HoN* to Garena after a year of planning. DeForest wanted to focus on other game ventures, and Garena was perfectly positioned to take over because it was already familiar with *HoN* from managing the game's presence in southwest Asia. After the sale, Garena chose to keep the game's designers and programmers in Kalamazoo under the new Frostburn Studios name. Bower says the change was all behind the scenes and hasn't had any effect on players in Asia, the U.S. or anywhere

else.

“We can do what we want, when we want,” he says. “(Garena is) saying, ‘We trust you.’”

While *HoN* and *Strife* are designed for so-called “hard-core” gamers who spend hours online playing the games, Fielding says Plarium is concentrating on mobile games that are quicker to play. Many of Plarium’s games are also available for laptop computers and social media sites, but the company is focusing its business on those who play games on iPhones and Androids. Plarium even has a slot machine simulator, though Fielding says his team doesn’t work on that game.

DeForest, who is usually very introverted, shyly admits a bit of pride in the existence of Frostburn and Plarium in the region. “We created long-lasting relationships with everyone at Garena, and many of our friends work at Frostburn and Plarium,” DeForest says. “I am very excited that S2 has been able to spawn multiple new game developers in the Kalamazoo area.”

A nexus of gaming’

And lest people think S2 is fading from the scene, DeForest says he will continue building S2 Games in the Kalamazoo area. The company announced in 2015 that it was scaling back its focus on *Strife* to work on a new game in development. The new game, which DeForest calls a “large departure” from *HoN* and *Strife*, is expected to be released in the first half of this year. Meanwhile, DeForest says S2 is looking to release *Strife* in China and is “working with our partners to get it to market as soon as possible.”

And while the team of developers at S2 works on the new game, DeForest, who calls himself a “serial entrepreneur,” has undertaken a new endeavor not remotely related to MOBAs. He has launched Opulent Blends, a company that handcrafts soaps, lotions and balms from natural ingredients. The company currently sells its products online and at several local stores.

DeForest says one of his goals has long been to offer jobs and industry in Kalamazoo and Michigan. During its *HoN* days, S2 Games was known for its outreach efforts to enlighten both kids and adults about careers in video game development. S2 hosted informational sessions at the Kalamazoo Public Library on video game development as a career and gave tours of its facility to groups of interested students.

Bower thinks similarly. “I’d love to see Michigan be a nexus for gaming,” he says. “We have a lot of great talent here, from Ferris State University and Michigan State University, and a good cost of living.”

Bower says that Kalamazoo hasn’t been a hard sell in recruiting new Frostburn employees. The company has brought in new workers from around the world, including from California and Garena’s home base of Singapore, he says.

Fielding says that when he and others from S2 joined Plarium, they could have relocated but opted to stay in the Kalamazoo area.

“The executive team at Plarium Michigan — there are three of us — all left S2 Games to open this studio. Since we were all located here and there are several studios in town, we decided to stay,” he says.

Since then, three additional former S2 employees have joined Plarium and the company has hired several others from out of state, including from Italy. Fielding says it was easy to stay and to persuade others to move here.

“I’ve worked in major game hubs before, and while (those places) definitely confer some advantages, the cost of living for employees is outrageous,” he says. “In Kalamazoo, we have a nice little gem of a town and can offer competitive salaries for the industry that leave our staff with more than enough resources to buy a house or start a family.

“It’s not for everyone, unless you like living somewhere awesome at a fraction of the price.”

Tags:

Video game companies

Kalamazoo

S2 Games

Marc DeForest

Frostburn Studios

Plarium Michigan Studio

Heroes of Newerth

Garena

HoN

James Fielding

Brad Bower

Strife

Category:

Features

SHARE

