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GENERATION ZERO

AVALANCHE ON MAKING THE
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TWINE

CREATE YOUR FIRST
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ANCIENT ASTRONAUTS

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EXPLORING INKLE'S TRANSLATION ADVENTURE, HEAVEN'S VAULT



^ Andrew and Philip Oliver have worked together throughout their careers and appear as enthusiastic about gaming as ever.

Double Dragon

WRITTEN BY
DAVID CROOKES

With a dizzying array of games behind them, Codemasters veterans Andrew and Philip Oliver now hope to share their wisdom with other British developers

^ From the egg-shaped 2D adventure *Dizzy* to the 3D platformer *Chicken Run*, Andrew and Philip Oliver have had to move with the times.



British game designers Andrew and Philip Oliver have done pretty well for themselves. They can look back over a career spanning

four decades – smiling at the highs, and sometimes grimacing at the lows. These are, after all, the brothers who created some of the British games industry's most iconic titles, chief among them the cult adventure series, *Dizzy*. In the process, the Olivers provided Codemasters with a string of top-selling budget games, before employing many hundreds of staff at Blitz Games Studios, which they founded in 1990.

But although the Olivers have just finished working for Rebellion – which

snapped up their most recent company, Radiant Worlds, in January 2018, mere months after its first and only game *SkySaga: Infinite Isles* was 'put on hold' – their enthusiasm for gaming burns as brightly as ever. So rather than catch their breath, the Olivers have created Game Dragons, a new consultancy firm which they hope will fire up British game businesses. In doing so, they'll draw on their years of experience as creators and businessmen.

"We've got a lot of skills in running companies, motivating people, dealing with investors, pitching, and negotiating games, and communicating with both brand and licence holders," Philip says. "We also have a strong understanding of video game culture, and we're naturally chatty people."



DON'T PANIC!

In the eighties and early nineties, ovoid hero Dizzy became something of a mascot for 8-bit computers. He starred in a series of graphic adventures and several spin-offs, including *Kwik Snax*, *Bubble Dizzy*, and *Dizzy Down the Rapids*. One of them, *Panic! Dizzy* for the NES, went unreleased, but was recently discovered in Philip Olivers' attic and restored by superfan Lukasz Kur. *Panic! Dizzy* was successfully Kickstarted back in February, meaning that, over 27 years after it was originally conceived, the long-lost puzzle collection will finally be getting a release in 2020.

SOUL BROTHERS

The Olivers' years of experience speak for themselves. It's said that, during the late eighties and early nineties, more than 15 percent of all games sold in the UK were made by the brothers. After launching Blitz Game Studios, the Olivers experimented with various spin-off ventures, from the download-focused Blitz Arcade to a more mature label called Volatile Games. Between 2008 and 2011, they launched the Blitz 1UP programme to help indie developers make games, and later replaced that with an online marketplace called IndieCity. And with *SkySaga: Infinite Isles*, they hoped to capture some of the *Minecraft* magic.

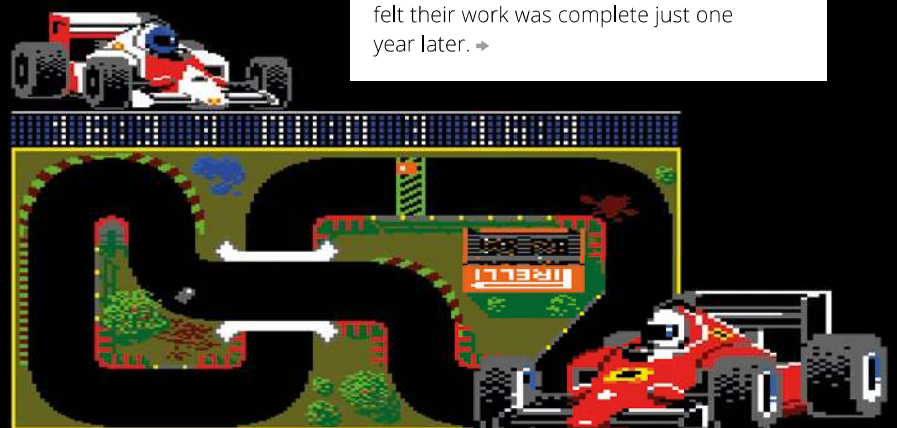
By harnessing all of that experience, the Oliver Twins believe they have much to offer game companies in terms of advice and assistance. "You need somebody to lean on, and you need somebody to share the ups and downs of business with," Philip says of his close working relationship with Andrew. He soon adds, though, that things haven't always gone quite so smoothly for the pair.

"I remember back in 1996, when I went to Sardinia for my first holiday in five years," Philip continues. "I landed at the airport, turned the phone on and immediately called Andrew, only for him to reply, 'I can't talk now. Fire, fire, fire, got to get out of the building.'"

It later transpired that a cleaner had emptied a metal bin from the smoking room into a black sack and placed it in the lift, unaware that some of the cigarette

"Andrew was running around, panicking as smoke billowed from the cracks around the lift door"

✓ The Guinness World Records features the Oliver Twins as the "most prolific 8-bit video game developers", with *Grand Prix Simulator* one of their hits.



butts were still hot. "They were just smouldering away among a mountain of paper so the whole flipping lift caught fire," Philip says, chuckling at the memory. "Andrew was running around, panicking as smoke billowed from the cracks around the lift door."

MOVING ON

Such tales pour from the Olivers, and you could easily fill a book with them. In fact, they already have: *Let's Go Dizzy! The Story of The Oliver Twins* was published two years ago, and follows their careers since they created their first work in 1983 – a type-in program called *Road Runner* for the magazine C&VG.

The Olivers have, however, found themselves in a tricky position of late. When Rebellion took on Radiant Worlds' 70 employees and renamed the studio Rebellion Warwick, the Olivers were asked to oversee the transition period, yet they felt their work was complete just one year later. ➔



"It got to a stage where everything was running smoothly and, quite frankly, having both of us there to effectively head up the studio was overkill," Philip says. "It's never a problem if you're running a business, hiring, and overseeing marketing, but when you're one studio within an overall group and they already have others to carry out those roles, then you just have to let them crack on. They have some great people and they all work really well."

Game Dragons is, therefore, the Oliver's' opportunity to branch out, and they're targeting three different groups. First, they aim to talk to companies that have IP and brands that can be exploited within the games industry. "We've done a lot of work in the past with Nickelodeon, Disney, DreamWorks, Universal, and Hasbro," Philip explains. "And while a lot of those guys already know the games industry, others understand that it's interesting and exciting, but they don't really know what to do with it because they don't really have any experts in the area."

Second, Game Dragons will look to work with fund managers, corporate and individual investors, buyers, and acquisition companies. "They might think, 'we want to buy this company or we want to invest in this company, or they may be interested in games and have something specific in mind,'" Philip continues. "With large amounts of money at stake, we can come in and look at what they're trying to achieve, who they

"We saw that text adventures were popular, and this was our graphical, cartoon-like take on it"



▲ *Ghostbusters II* was a big-selling game and one of the Oliver's' early full-price titles.

achieve it with, and assess the risks. It's about making recommendations."

Finally, the brothers want to talk to studios that want to scale up. "It's likely they'll be doing OK but think they could do better, and we'll be in a position to give them ideas," Philip adds. "Here we'll be able to look at what worked for us, and advise developers who want to increase their capacity, move to new offices, or fix a broken culture. It might be that they've had key people leave or people in positions that are inappropriate, and they're not sure how to deal with it."

As it stands, though, they're not explicitly looking at the games themselves – unless, of course, a developer insists. You get the sense that Andrew, in particular, would love to give his opinion about the games – "speak for yourself," he chips in when Philip says they won't comment on where a game is going wrong or could be better – but the Oliver's firmly believe that a successful developer or publisher mustn't concentrate entirely on the game. "Besides, I'll be honest: I'd have told Notch not to launch *Minecraft* when he did, but that turned out fine, didn't it?" Philip laughs.

Such a stance is based on the Oliver's' own career and the observations they've made over the past four decades. "There are many examples of companies making great games that have gone bust, and businesses which have been really successful only for you to look at what they're making and thinking, 'Really, is that what you're successful from?'," says Philip. "The important thing is not to focus entirely on the game and to think about the business as a whole – thoughts about how you're going to acquire users is a science in itself. Will they be paid or free users, and how will you convert from free to paid?"

CHANGING TIMES

Years ago, such issues were less apparent. Developers made games, sold them, and moved straight on to the next; but even back in the eighties, it was still important to make games that people would buy. "When we entered the games industry full-time,



EDUCATING UNIVERSITIES

To help more students find their feet in the video game industry, Andrew and Philip Oliver have been working closely with the British Games Institute on a new education summit called GamesEd19.

Taking place at the National Videogame Museum on the 15th and 16th April, it will bring together 40 leaders from universities, colleges, and development studios, with the aim of encouraging closer ties between educators and the industry.

"It's really important that universities understand what's wanted from the games industry, and how best to get people ready for the workplace," says Philip Oliver. "At the moment, a student can very easily go from being lectured by somebody who's never been in the games industry, trying to learn all of the skills they believe will get them a really good job making video games, only to find that studios aren't taking them on because they don't understand the real world. I'm sure lots of good things will come out of this summit."



▲ The Oliver Twins made the jump to the 16-bit era in the early 1990s. (NB: Japanese Sega Mega Drive pictured.)

SPOTTING TRENDS

The Oliver Twins have had to constantly adapt to a changing market over the years. Their first big jump was from the 8-bit generation to 16-bit, which also coincided with a move from computers to consoles. "In many ways, the decision to leave computers behind in the 16-bit era was easy, because piracy was so rampant and it became difficult to make money," says Philip. "Cartridges couldn't be pirated, so our strategy was to apply the same skills we learned on the Amiga for the Mega Drive."

Later leaps included that from 2D to 3D, and from boxed games to digital. "There are always going to be hurdles," Philip says. "Currently, we're right on the front edge of art and technology, but because technology is moving so fast and art is fickle, you have to keep reinventing yourself. We can draw on strategies we've seen over the years to adapt."



▼ Philip Oliver, pictured at the height of Dizzy's fame.



having decided not to go to university, the first thing we did was think about the market first and consider what we could sell," Philip explains.

Indeed, in coming up with *Super Robin Hood* – a budget-priced platformer published by Codemasters in 1986, when the twins were just 17 – they were deliberately tapping into a familiar name in the public domain.

"After that, we created *Ghost Hunters*, which was influenced by *Ghostbusters* and *Scooby-Doo*, and then we said, 'OK, what else will sell really well?'" Andrew adds. "We considered racing cars, because they're pretty aspirational, which is why we wrote and released *Grand Prix Simulator*. We thought about what people would buy rather than what we could make."

Even so, the Oliver Twins tried to make quality titles with a budget price tag (many of their early games sold for just £1.99): *Super Robin Hood* and the popular platformer *Ghost Hunters*, for example, featured digitised speech, while *Grand Prix Simulator* allowed for competitive two-player races. With sales booming, Codemasters gained confidence in the twins' ability – to a certain degree at least. While the twins were supposed to be making *Pro Ski Simulator*, the Oliver Twins instead created *Dizzy: The Ultimate Cartoon Adventure* behind the back of Codemasters' boss, David Darling. Darling was convinced *Dizzy* wouldn't sell, and only agreed to publish it in order to avoid upsetting the Oliver Twins, because their

previous three games had shot to number one. Eventually, however, *Dizzy* sales took off, resulting in one of the longest-running games series of all time. "We saw that text adventures were popular, and this was our graphical, cartoon-like take on it," Andrew says. "Again, it was about having a hunch for what would sell."

LEARNING FROM MISTAKES

Mistakes have been made, but the Oliver Twins say this was inevitable, as one generation moved to another and new ideas emerged. They're also thankful that their career hasn't been entirely error-free. "I was told years ago that in America if you've got a bankrupt company behind you, you're seen as more employable and more of an expert than if you've got a successful company," Philip explains. "I always thought that was a bit weird, but actually, if you had suddenly got success, you don't know how or why. Maybe you were in the right place at the right time, and it kind of worked for you. But if you've seen failure, then you will have struggled like hell to work out all the mitigating strategies to see which ones work and which ones don't."

The games industry can often be a gamble. Blitz Games Studios, which started life as Interactive Studios, produced games based on well-known brands like *SpongeBob SquarePants* and *Bratz*, and made a lot of money in the process, but the company was not averse to taking calculated risks. *Invincible Tiger: The Legend of Han Tao*, developed by subsidiary Blitz Arcade in 2009, included stereoscopic modes that made use of 3D-ready televisions, but such sets didn't sell as expected, and few saw ▶



UNIVERSITY CHALLENGE

Although Andrew and Philip Oliver didn't attend university, their success hasn't gone unnoticed by academia. In 2008, the twins received honorary doctorates from Coventry University, and this year, Philip was made a visitor professor of Stafford University. "We enjoy trying to make a positive difference from the skills and experience that we've got, and I think that going into universities and talking to students on games courses can inspire them," says Philip.



smartphones and tablets meant our clients were pulling out of big box, licensed games," Philip says. "THQ went out of business, and Disney pulled out of the sector, and they accounted for 60 percent of our business." Rebellion and Exient took on many of Blitz's staff, while 50 moved with the Olivers to their new company, Radiant Worlds.

"Radiant Worlds wasn't a management failure either," Philip says, adding that, although there are no public figures for the number of players who signed up to *SkySaga's* free-to-play alpha, the game was "very popular". Despite this, Korean publisher Smilegate, which funded the game, nevertheless decided to pull the plug in 2017.

CREATING LOYALTY

Despite all the ups and downs, the company's staff have remained loyal – and treatment of staff is something Philip Oliver's keen to push to the forefront. "It's important to treat people well, and that's a big lesson for a lot of businesses," says Philip. "If you want the best creative people, then you must respect them and treat them properly, because then they'll be with you for many years. It's also important that you understand the power relationship when you sign a contract. If a contract means you won't profit from doing a great job, then your motivation will change. Unfortunately,

the game's impressive graphics as a result.

To that end, Philip says he's learned that it's important for developers to try to predict where the market's going without over-committing – although unexpected problems will still sometimes surface. Blitz closed for good when it went into voluntary liquidation in 2013, resulting in the loss of 175 jobs, though Philip insists this wasn't down to management failure. Rather, he says, its struggles were due to difficult trading conditions – hastened by the global economic crisis – frustrations with clients, and sheer bad luck.

"People were moving away from physical goods and moving towards digital, and the transition of the casual market to towards



▲ The Olivers made their name producing top-selling budget titles for Codemasters such as *Ghost Hunters*.



▲ Dizzy - starring here in *Fantastic Dizzy* for the Mega Drive - featured in 15 games between 1987 and 1992.



▲ Created by Blitz Games Studios' downloadable game division, *Blitz Arcade*, *Drolitz* proved to be a fun puzzler.

a lot of contracts allow the side with the most power to wield it over the other, and it's more about getting one over on them. Only it soon becomes apparent that the relationship is broken and both sides lose."

Such advice extends to the relationship between developer and publisher. It's interesting to note that, despite the trend for developers marketing games themselves, the Olivers continue to recognise the importance of a publisher. Publishers are specialists in marketing and distribution, they say, and can provide much-needed finance. The Olivers also recommend that indies don't go it alone right away; they even advise fledgling developers to get a studio job first to see how the industry works. At the very least, they urge startups to nail down a firm business plan early on.

"When we started developing games, we had to create a business plan, and it's absolutely fundamental that developers do this," says Philip. "But we've had some indies ask us what a business plan is and they don't have anything, which can be worrying - if they're trying to make a living out of games and make money, then there's a lot more to it than just being creative."

It's one of the reasons why the pair aren't currently prepared to nurture indie startups from infancy. "We don't want to



"If you want the best creative people, then you must respect them and treat them properly"



be inundated with an enormous number of companies and become absolutely snowed under," Philip says, "so what we're going to do is offer general advice online to anyone starting out."

They'll do this by posting videos on YouTube about running and investing in businesses, and they intend to write articles, available for free, which delve deeper into similar issues. "We'll be saying, 'Right, we think this is really good advice for indies. Please do follow this advice,'" Philip says.

The Olivers seem undaunted by the task ahead and, indeed, over the course of our interview, it becomes abundantly clear that they're excited about the future. "We enjoy sharing experiences, and also look forward to learning, too," Philip says. "As programmers, we're also analytical, and so we're good at assessing what works and what doesn't."

Nor are the Olivers entirely sure where their new venture will lead. "We don't know where it's going to go, but it should be a fun ride," Philip says. "We're really hoping that we go into some interesting companies, and make them even more successful." 🐉