

# BIG HUGE GAMES

Tim played the role of the Black Knight in the multimedia portion of *Magic: The Gathering*.



Interview with Game Developer Tim Train

**Even if you're not an avid gamer, you've probably heard of games Tim Train has worked on: *Colonization*, *Civilization II*, *Alpha Centauri*, *Gettysburg*, and 2003 PC Game of the Year *Rise of Nations*. Over the years, Tim has worked with some of the industry's most innovative game companies, including Microprose, Firaxis, and Big Huge Games, a company he cofounded in 2001. In this interview, Tim describes a career that started with testing games and led to producing and designing them—and still involves a lot of playing for a living.**

**U** read on the Big Huge Web site that you have a degree in international relations. How did you end up in the games industry?

I went to college without knowing what I wanted to do with my life. When I graduated, I still had no idea of what I wanted to do. IR was a good major, but I didn't want to go into foreign service, and I wasn't ready to do international business. While I was getting my bearings after college, I did a lot of temping.

Then, one day at the fencing club, I started talking to another fencer who happened to be a game designer for a local company called Microprose. It turned out that they had a sudden desperate need for game testers because two people had just left the company.

**Did you have the background for that job?**

I didn't have a lot of technical background. I knew word processing, and I had certainly played a lot of Nintendo when I was in college. Nowadays, the entry bar for a tester, technically, is fairly high; you have to know a lot of computer science in addition to having played a lot of games. At the time, though, my experience was enough, and I joined Microprose in 1991. There, I tested games for about a year and a half, and then I managed the test department for about another year and a half.

The timing was good, because CD-ROMs were just becoming big, which translated into a need for multimedia content to fill up those CDs. I did multimedia work on *Colonization*, *Civilization II*, and

a game called *F-14 Defender*. I did a lot of filming—for example, I would go to Colonial Williamsburg and film reenactors, or to the Naval Air Station to film planes. When Microprose was bought out, one of the partners left and started a company called Firaxis. I went there to work on the multimedia for their title *Gettysburg*.

**Had you had experience with filming?**

No, I learned that all on the job. I had a mentor in multimedia at Microprose who really taught me a lot about movie making and about the technical end, so I learned a lot.

I did multimedia for about a year and a half at Firaxis and then moved on to be a producer and a designer for *Alpha Centauri*, a space-exploration game.

**What does a producer do?**

There are three main kinds of expertise that go into making a computer game: programming, art, and design. The producer is responsible for making sure that those experts are talking to each other. If the designers decide, for example, that

they want the game to include a camel-riding unit, the producer will go to the artists and the programmers and put together schedules to make that happen.

The producer is also responsible for the relationship with the publisher who puts out the game and is usually the point of contact for marketing.

### And what does the designer do?

Designers come up with content for the game; they serve a role similar to screenwriters for films. Usually there will be a lead designer, who is responsible for the content decisions, and a team of designers working with him. A lot of their job really is playing games and extracting ideas about what makes a great game. They might also be responsible for generating content. For example, we want our single-player campaigns to have a nice story arc; a player might start off as a lowly general, and by the end become an emperor and get to take over the world. That requires designers who script out scenarios.

Designers also have to balance the game. In a strategy game, players might have the ability to produce military units, like bowmen or spearmen or phalanxes. As a designer, you don't want one unit to be so powerful that it's the only one people will build. If you make the tanks really powerful, for example, then people will only build tanks. So the tanks need to have a weakness—maybe bazooka troops can take out the tanks, and infantrymen can take out the bazookas, and tanks can take out the infantrymen. There's a kind of rock-paper-scissors element to it. The player probably won't abstract it out to that level, but the designer has to.

### This makes me think of *Rise of Nations*, which includes units like those. How did you guys get started on that game?

There had been a crop of real-time strategy games, most notably *Age of Empires II* and *StarCraft*, that were fantastical, phenomenal games, and we spent a lot of time playing those at Firaxis. We would sit around and say, "wouldn't it be cool if you could do this," or "I hate it

when it does this," and "here's how you could fix this."

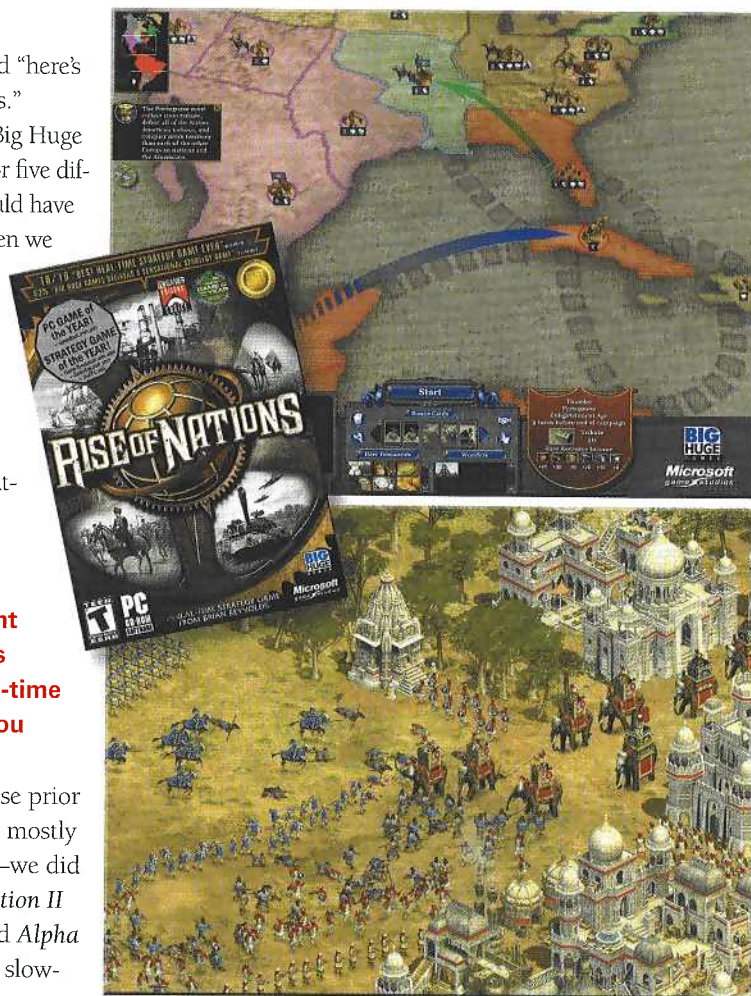
When we started Big Huge in 2001, we had four or five different ideas that we could have made into a game. When we went around to publishers, we pitched different ideas, but we were most excited about *Rise of Nations*. We all wanted to do a historical real-time strategy game.

### Reviews of *Rise of Nations* always point out that it combines turn-taking and real-time strategy. Why did you decide to do that?

Our team's expertise prior to *Rise of Nations* was mostly in turn-based games—we did a game called *Civilization II* and then a game called *Alpha Centauri*, which was a slow-paced and very deliberate game. It was like you were on a game board and could move your pieces around. You could manage your economy and fiddle around with your cities and take as long as you wanted.

But in real-time games, everything is happening at once: the other guy is coming in with his army and you have to decide *right now* what to do. The player's bandwidth—what he can pay attention to—becomes a resource. In those games, you can only pay attention to a certain number of things, and you have to make decisions: am I going to pay more attention to diplomacy or to military? The time pressure adds an interesting intensity to the games.

While our team's history was in *designing* turn-based games, we really loved *playing* real-time games. We wanted to enter the real-time market but also keep some of the aspects of turn-based games, such as a bigger scope. Turn-based games can be about the entire world or about big spans of time.



In *Rise of Nations*, players can command the fate of empires in seven different epochs through all of human history. In the bottom photo, a line of Indian war elephants defends against an invasion by Alexander the Great's phalanxes.

### I assume that a lot of historical research must have gone into this game. Did your IR come in handy?

If you're designing a history game, a history or literature background is really helpful. The design staff by and large reads a lot of history, so we all have some background in it. We have two huge bookshelves filled with materials about different kinds of military units. The *Men in Arms* reference series goes into depth about different weapons, costume styles, tactics, and history—there's stuff from the Sumerian warriors of the 8th century BC, the Mongol invaders of the 1200s, you name it—and we drew a lot of the visual stuff from that.

We also had a historian on staff for a while to help with the specific historical research, such as what a Bantu spearman would have looked like.

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### When did you bring in game testers?

We use a prototype method of game development. Within a month of signing our deal with Microsoft, we had a version of the game that you could pretty much play. It had placeholder art—artists would just scribble in a hospital or city or whatever. It looked bad, but it allowed us to see how some of the core game concepts worked.

The design staff played the game at least once a day if not more than that. Anything that was fun, we tried to pump up and bring to the fore; and anything that wasn't fun, we either changed or cut. By the time the game shipped, we'd been playing it every single day for two-and-a-half years. So in that sense, we'd been testing it almost since day one.

The other kinds of testing come about a year before release. One is to ferret out all of the bugs. This kind of quality-assurance testing is not about being a good player; it's about trying to play through everything to make sure that nothing crashes. A lot of times it's not a very interesting job. The other subset of testing is a little more interesting: Microsoft employs people whose entire job is to be world-class game players. Their job is to tell us if the game is balanced as a whole.

### What do you like best about *Rise of Nations*?

In *Rise of Nations*, we kept a lot of what is really cool about real-time strategy games, but we added a lot of neat twists. For example, in traditional real-time strategy games you might have a base, and you build barracks and markets and libraries and all kinds of stuff. And there isn't anything preventing other players from building a city, a fort, a barracks right behind you, so that all of a sudden they'd appear with this giant army right next to you and you lose the game because of that.

In a history game, that feels unrealistic. I mean, Napoleon didn't send a couple of

workers to build up a castle somewhere and then go storm the city. We added a mechanism for national borders, so you can't build outside your territory. You can do things to expand your territory, but you can't just go outside and build. It feels a lot more historical and more realistic.

I also like the way we did the single-player campaign. In most single-player campaigns, you advance from scenario to scenario in a very linear way—first you have to complete objective x, then you move on to objective y. In *Rise of Nations*, we wanted to create something more like *Risk*. You can attack any country you want, for example, and that attack will come with certain consequences and certain choices. In this way, you make the story instead of the game designers making a story that you have to follow.

### Now that the game is out, what are you working on?

We're working on an expansion pack that includes more nations, more single-player campaigns, some new game-play systems. We also have a small group of six or eight guys working on the next big thing. As we're getting closer to mastering the expansion pack, which is scheduled to go out the door in another six weeks or so, most people will start working on the next big thing. It'll be a strategy game, which is what our team is known for, but that's about all I can tell you. Our publisher will shoot me if I tell you more than that.

### You got into the industry at a good time. Is there still a lot of opportunity for new talent?

It's not that hard to get into the computer game industry. You just have to be willing to work for not a lot of money at first, and you have to be willing to put in the work to excel at your job. We have at least three people here who started out as testers getting paid \$8 an hour. They hustled and showed they'd do whatever it takes to make the company work, to make the game work, and soon we realized that we couldn't live without them. We ended up creating full-time positions for them.

If you've got the chops, you can go anywhere you want. You've just got to be

willing to be among the best at what you do. If you want to do art, for example, you can't do stuff that looks like everybody else's. You've got to know the tools inside and out, you have to put together different kinds of portfolios.

You do need to be a team player. Here at Big Huge, we place a very high premium on people being able to work well with other people. In the games industry, there are a lot of fantastic technical people who don't have great personalities—maybe they're prickly or hard to communicate with. We'd rather have a four-star technical person with a four-star personality than a five-star technical person with a two-star personality.

### Do you have any other advice for people who want to pursue a career like yours?

Play a lot of games, which sounds obvious. And not just computer games or your favorite kind of console games. Play board games. Understand why chess is a fun game. You don't have to be a grand master chess player, but you should understand what's cool about it. Play some of the German board games that are out there, like *Settlers of Catan*, *Puerto Rico*, *Lord of the Rings: The Confrontation*, and *Amun-Re*.

And don't focus only on games. One of the things that characterizes a lot of successful people in this industry is that they have a very diverse set of interests. They're not monomaniacally focused on this one thing. They have a lot of cool and unusual outside interests.

### Are you ever amazed at where you've ended up?

Sometimes. There's a classic *Far Side* cartoon that encapsulates this industry in a lot of ways: There's a kid sitting in front of the television with a Nintendo controller, and his parents are looking over him and fondly thinking of classified ads like, "Wanted: killer Nintendo player. \$50,000 plus company car." Basically, that's what happened to a lot of us. We played games all our lives, and in the end, the passion we had for computer games became our job. That's one of the reasons we spend 14 or 15 hours here a day—it doesn't feel like a job. It's *great* to be here. ■