

GAME CHANGER

P.E.I. entrepreneur creates reality-based virtual world — and a potential fog-centric economy

By Quentin Casey





When Stuart Duncan sold his previous video game company, Bight Games, to industry giant EA Mobile in 2011, a non-compete agreement forced him into a three-year hiatus.

"I was listening to records and collecting cars," he recalls of that period. He says he bought a 2011 Mercedes E350 just to experience the feeling of showing up and buying a car off the lot; his records spanned from '70s jazz to Glenn Gould to Iron Maiden and Dolly Parton.

Within a year, however, Duncan started mulling an idea for a new video game studio, one that would incorporate "real-time, real-world data" into the gameplay.

One day, in the spring of 2013, Duncan was in his oceanfront yard, watching the ice shift, buckle, and create natural sculptures in Charlottetown harbour. He had the name for his company: icejam.

Officially formed in 2014, icejam is now developing Qurius, a world-building game that Duncan hopes will be the first of many video games to incorporate real-world data into the gameplay. In Qurius, for example, the weather in your location will influence your game.

"If it's raining outside, it's raining in your game," he says. Weather in your location could also be traded on a global weather commodities exchange. Fog and rain in Nova Scotia could be of value to a player in hot and dry California.

Stuart Duncan is the founder of P.E.I.-based game development company, icejam. He and his firm are set to launch Qurius, a video game that incorporates real-world data into the gameplay.

"You'd potentially have a fog-based economy," he says. The game also draws on celestial data.

Duncan expects Qurius, a mobile game that will be free to play, to be released on a limited basis in Canada this summer. Following some likely tweaks and improvements, it will be launched globally in late 2016 or early 2017. (The game will produce revenue through optional purchases in the game, though Duncan emphasizes it's not a pay-to-win game where users must buy access to new levels).

Duncan says data-driven games could incorporate everything from the current positions of city buses to the number of steps a player records on their pedometer.

"There are many sources of real-time, live data," he says. He argues it's a completely new video game approach, with few, if any, competitors. And it's only now possible because of new technology.

"The timing is right to do it," he added. "It's brand new."

Sean Turner, the co-founder of Hutch Games, a mobile video game studio based in London, England, says Duncan's approach could

players hooked in the virtual world.

"It's an exciting, new idea," Turner says. "Whether it will work or not, I don't know."

Neither does Duncan. "The biggest hurdle is that we don't understand market acceptance yet," he says. "We're making a big bet based on a gut feel, a lot of combined experience, and what we perceive to be an opportunity. But we don't know whether people will love it."

"It's unproven."

Duncan, 45, recently received a

significant vote of confidence when Build Ventures invested \$3 million in icejam. It was the eighth investment for Build, a \$65-million account funded by the four Atlantic Canadian provincial governments, other public sector entities, and private individuals.

General partner Patrick Keefe admits he was hesitant about making a video game investment. "Not all venture investors will invest in the gaming sector," he says.

Two points intrigued Keefe, however. The first was the core

**US\$100
MILLION**

Revenue from
The Simpsons: Tapped
Out, a game Stuart
Duncan created and
developed for EA Mobile

potentially address one of the challenges of free-to-play games: keeping the games current and ever-changing, to ensure users keep playing.

Turner, who now runs Hutch Games from Lunenburg, N.S., says the flow of real-time data into mobile games could reduce the workload for developers at studios like his. Gameplay could change based on outside factors, requiring less tinkering and updating by developers. In other words, changes in the real world could help keep

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of Prince Edward
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\$3 MILLION
amount Build Ventures
invested in icejam,
based on the strength
of Stuart Duncan's
technology and his history
in game development

technology that Duncan has developed. Icejam's Playable Data Platform could integrate real-time data into many games, not just Qurius.

"We feel that playable data has the potential to be genre-defining," Keefe says. "This platform has tremendous potential to make a dent in the free-to-play market."

Keefe was also impressed by Duncan's history of game development.

Duncan's introduction to video games occurred at age 12 when

he received a Commodore 64 for Christmas. He started Bight Games in 2004 and created what he describes as one of the first free-to-play hits: Trade Nations. At Bight he later conceived and developed The Simpsons: Tapped Out for EA. That game has reportedly generated well over US\$100 million in revenue.

EA bought Bight in 2011 and has since grown its Charlottetown office to about 80 employees. (The Simpsons game is still produced there. It is regularly updated and expanded).

The icejam office has 15 employees, the majority of which jumped over from EA to again work with Duncan.

"All the guys on my team are veterans of this industry," he says. "It's kind of like getting the band back together with guys who are very passionate about really creating something new in this industry. And that's what we're doing. We're effectively creating a new category of games."

According to Keefe, Duncan has assembled a "world-class team."

"Our starting point is always the team and the founders," Keefe says. "Are they cutting edge in their field? Are they world-class in the area in which they operate?"

Duncan predicts icejam's ranks will double to 30 in the next year. The company has also opened a small Toronto marketing office.

"The long-term vision is to prove the case that data-driven games are more engaging than ones that aren't — to get to the point where the consumer expects some form of real data," he says. "And we'll be the leaders in providing it."

Would he like to again sell his studio to EA, and perhaps again enjoy extra time for records and cars? (His garage currently houses a 2005 Maserati Coupe Cambiocorsa and a 1993 Cadillac Allante).

He laughs.

"Back to EA? Anything is possible." •

FEEDBACK

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