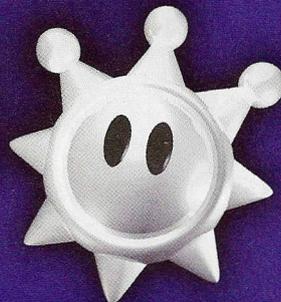
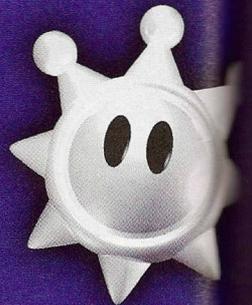


GREAT SOU

A CAPTAIN COOK (LOOK) AT THE DINKY DI (TRUE) STATE OF THE AUSSIE (AUSTRALIAN) GAMES INDUSTRY, AND THE BLOKES (MEN) AND SHEILAS (WOMEN) WHO ARE A PART OF IT.
BY DAZZA WELLS



HERN LAND

Australia doesn't do things by halves. We love big things - we've got a pineapple that's 16 meters high, a 17-meter tall lobster, and a rocking horse that's 18 meters at its highest point. Our longest bridge goes for nearly three kilometres, while our longest stretch of road goes for a shade under 200 kilometres with nary a bend.

When it comes to game development, our achievements are nothing to sneeze at either. The Melbourne-born *de Blob* sold over 700,000 copies worldwide, *Puzzle Quest* has been a massive hit on each of its eight platforms, and the *Legend of Spyro* trilogy was handled in a respectable fashion by Queensland's Krome Studios.

They're all great Aussie success stories, and ones that we should be proud of... but put them up against the rest of the world, and they instantly become small fry. Multi-million sellers such as *Gears of War* and *Grand Theft Auto* are obvious examples, but even titles such as *Big Brain Academy* and *WarioWare: Twisted!* put them in the shade, selling approximately five million and one million copies respectively. All are wildly different games in terms of genre and audience, but they're also different in terms of how they were funded and developed. Titles made *Down Under* face an entirely unique set of challenges, ranging from our remote geographical location, to a government that offers no monetary support or tax incentives.

Why? How? And by whom? Let's find out.

ON THE OUTSIDE

"I like to say we fight well above our weight division, says Tom Crago, President of the Game Developers' Association of Australia (GDAA) and CEO of Tantalus Interactive. "Obviously we're a small country in terms of population, and we sit squarely on the other side of the world from most things that matter in this industry. It just means that we have to be that much better than an equivalent game development studio in, say, Los Angeles. The fact that Australian developers win so much work is testament to the fact that we are competing."

Thankfully, we're not only competing in the game



de Blob sold 700,000 copies worldwide

development arena, but we're being welcomed by our international peers. Or are we? Creative Assembly designer Dan Toose puts to rest images of intercontinental rivalry. "Firstly, the games industry is not made up of chest-beating patriots that think of studios based on geography or nationality. Frankly, they're all way too busy just trying to make games. Secondly, if I listen to the conversations going on around me, I'm going to hear at least six different kinds of accent. It's a truly international industry, and we're a part of it."

But Peter Alexander, a gameplay programmer at Spinfast Studios, disagrees, saying that Australia still exists on the fringe. "Before I immigrated to Australia from the UK in 2002, I had no idea that there were any game development studios in Australia. There are, of course, more now, but I still feel that the perception of Australian games development from abroad is one of unawareness. The perception exists, I believe, because Australian games development hasn't yet reached the critical mass that will allow it to be recognised as a major source of high-quality games. However, the games industry is

growing rapidly in Australia, so I do feel that this perception won't last for much longer."

Alexander's Spinfast cohort, 3D artist David Keep, agrees. "I think that sometimes Australian developers are overlooked because of our isolation and people aren't as aware of some of the excellent work that's been done here. Of course, there's lots of talented studios in other countries competing for attention... but I think we are moving up in the ladder.

"If we keep building up our reputation for quality, enthusiasm and reliability and make more Aussie IPs like *Ty* [the Tasmanian Tiger] and *Destroy All Humans*, soon there won't be any excuse for



I like to say we fight well above our weight division, says Tom Crago, President of the Game Developers' Association of Australia (GDAA)



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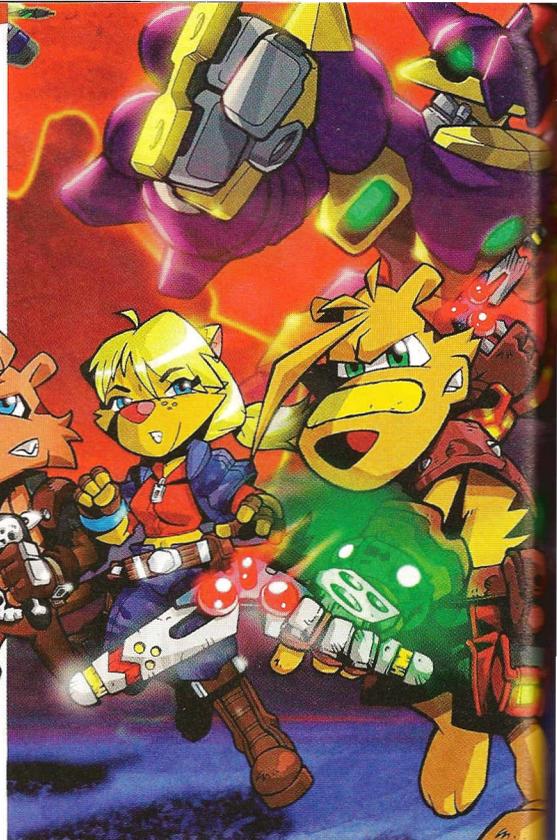
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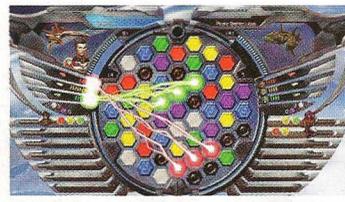
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John Guscott believes the first step is to widen the talent pool, starting with some of the industry's more overlooked roles



[top right] Ty the Tasmanian Tiger
[top] Puzzle Quest has been a hit on eight platforms
[above] Puzzle Quest
Galactrix

overlooking Australian developers." It's a sentiment backed by Blue Tongue's senior audio designer, John Guscott. "Publishers are always looking for studios that can give value for their development dollars," he says, "and Australia boasts many excellent studios which are capable of delivering brilliant games, on budget and on time. So, as an industry we offer good value for money and a proven track record. Culturally, Australia is well placed to be able to make games that have broad market appeal, and publishers will place quality licenses with Aussie developers, knowing that they can deliver to (and in many cases, beyond) expectations."

"The challenge for Australian development is to continue to bring new IPs to market. The best way to do this is to continue to build a reputation for solid and reliable development along with a coherent and marketable creative vision." Ask Toose, and he'll tell you the fruits of that labour are already paying off. "We're at a point where we've had enough solid titles and enough flops that I believe overseas industry folk don't have a set expectation or perception as to what Australian developers will produce - they judge everything we do on its own merits."

Guscott agrees. "Games development is a global industry and Australian game developers are able to compete on the same footing as their international counterparts."

The influencing factors that make the most impact with gamers are the

visible quality and appeal of a game. It's not about where a game is from, but how good it is."

And there's no denying that it is good. Even though he feels we're looking in from the outside with a catalogue of moderate hits, Alexander nevertheless says we're "up there with the best." "There's no denying that Australia can produce world-class quality games," he states. "The problem is simply in the quantity. In order for Australia to receive the worldwide recognition it deserves, we just need to produce more of those AAA-quality titles."

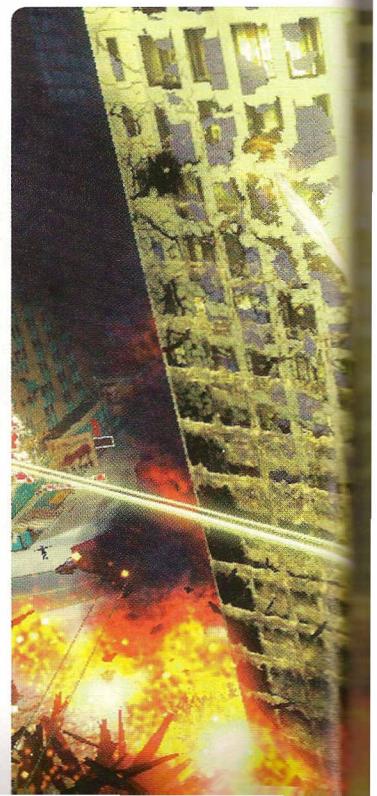
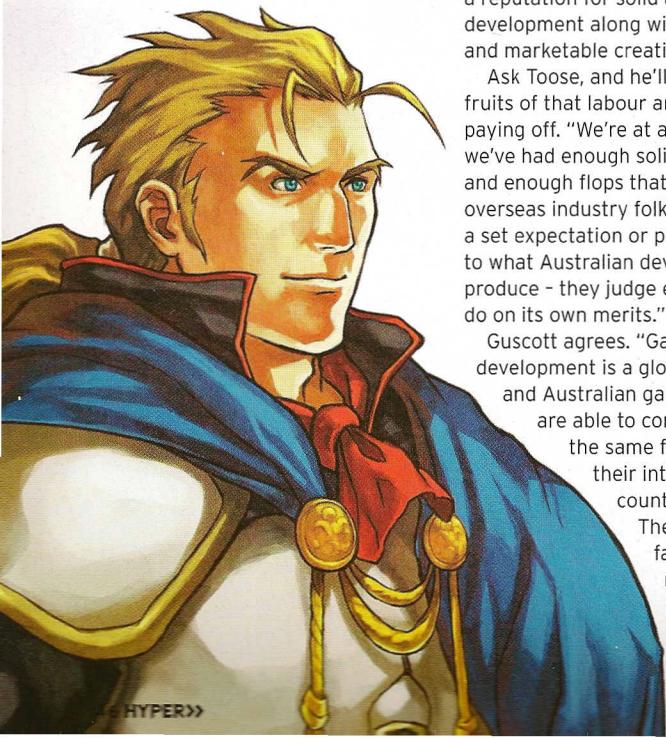
Crago feels that the latter desire is one that we're already meeting. "We do ... have a reputation for quality," he says, "and for being able to work on a diverse range of platforms. Our genre range is pretty broad too. I think we also have a cultural sensibility that works in both the UK and the US. And being so close to Asia helps with the Japanese and Chinese markets. The most important thing is for us to continue to develop titles that do well critically and commercially. Producing a multi-million-unit seller would be a pretty good result too..."

TALK OF THE TOWN

But what's the best way to achieve that? John Guscott believes the first step is to widen the talent pool, starting with some of the industry's more overlooked roles.

"There are far fewer video game voice actors working in Australia, compared to other regions," he says. "I would love to see more video game voice talent available locally. Of course, due to the fact that the USA has the largest share of the worldwide video game retail market, a large number of games

do require American voices. Having said that, it's not just about the accents! It would be great to see an Australian casting agency specialise in video game voice work, instead of sticking to the more established areas of commercial radio and television, which incidentally, require vastly different approaches to performance and production than games do. Until that happens, we will be forced to use skill in this area from other regions such as London and Hollywood. The end result for us is the same whether we were to use international talent or local. The only difference would be that if were to utilise good local talent, we wouldn't need to go through our current trauma of having to get up at 3am on a weekday in order to





Spyro the Dragon

listen in on a conference call that is patched through to a recording studio in LA!"

That's where Diane de Zylva comes in. Starting out in community radio, she took to the US to expand on her skills before returning Down Under to establish Bluegum Studios, where she records voice-overs for various clients. Recently she completed work on a game called Darkest of Days, her first videogame role.

"My character is known as 'Mother'," says de Zylva. "She is a bit like the mission controller who tasks the player with their assignment, and comments on the success or failure of the mission on their return. Visually she is represented as a partial face on a video screen in a control centre - you can see her on some of the current promo trailers. She is an authority figure and is quite formal. She can be warm but holds herself at a distance as she has control of the player's fate."

As for how it all happened, the process is described as fairly straightforward. "For this game, our recording session lasted an hour. The session was with a phone patch,

so the producers in the US rang me at a prearranged time, and I had the phone with me in the recording booth. This meant they could hear and give direction on everything I was saying and recording. There is the benefit of immediate feedback and the producers having some confidence they are getting the sound they want.

"In this instance I recorded the character by myself. I received a synopsis via email, in addition to getting a brief from the Producers when they rang in, so I knew who some of the other key characters were and how they were interacting with my character. I had the other characters' lines on the page, so I had to imagine them talking to me and then respond to that."

The fact that this particular role was for an internationally based client (though de Zylva says "the majority of my clients are Australian") upholds her belief that being based in a remote geographical location is no barrier to obtaining work that's being offered internationally. "Like all things it can often be about connecting with the right people," she says, "so if someone really

All Humans - Destroyed



THE PLAYERS



NAME: Peter Alexander

ROLE: Programmer, Spinfast

KNOWN FOR: Cricket Game

BASICALLY....: "...I am one of the two programmers here at Spinfast, and my primary role is in gameplay

programming. I'm responsible for taking the designer's designs, and the artist's art, and turning them into something you can (hopefully) play."



NAME: Tom Crago

ROLE: CEO, Tantalus Media / President, GDA

KNOWN FOR: Spyro: Dawn of the Dragon

BASICALLY....: "...I'm the CEO at

Tantalus, which means I sit in my office and let people far smarter than me make our games. I'll take a look at those games when they're done, but for the most part I'll just stay out of the way. It's a pretty sweet gig. The GDA role is a little tougher. I'm the President of the Association, and those responsibilities are somewhat tougher to shirk."



NAME: Diane de Zylva

ROLE: Voice-over artist

KNOWN FOR: Darkest of Days

BASICALLY....: "...I am a voice over talent/narrator based in Sydney and I did

one of the voices (Mission Controller/Mother) for a game called Darkest of Days, coming up for release this year.



NAME: John Guscott

ROLE: Senior Audio Designer, Blue Tongue

KNOWN FOR: de Blob

BASICALLY....: "...I work on all aspects of game audio. Specifically this includes:

music, sound design, dialogue, implementation and tools development. On 'de Blob', most of my time was taken up writing, recording and producing the music, along with developing the interactive music system and tools which were written especially for the game by one of our audio programmers."



NAME: David Keep

ROLE: 3D Artist, Spinfast

KNOWN FOR: Cricket Game

BASICALLY....: "...I am the 3D artist at Spinfast games. This means I do most of

the 3D modelling, texturing, character rigging and animating for our games. Also, according to our producer I am responsible for anything that breaks or goes wrong in the office."



NAME: Dan Toose

ROLE: Designer, Creative Assembly

KNOWN FOR: Medieval 2: Total War, Stormrise

BASICALLY....: "...on Medieval 2 I did everything from write dialogue,

create the campaign map, designed a speech into the diplomacy system, designed the 'Vices and Virtues' system and worked with artists and programmers to help direct different bits of code and assets. While there are exceptions, designers typically specialise less than others in game development. Really though, I guess you could break most days down into sessions of research, brainstorming and negotiating ideas, scripting and a host of other little tasks."



GREAT SOUTHERN LAND

wants you then there are ways around being limited by location. Local means being involved with Australian creative industries, often homegrown content which is great, and we have some very talented people here. However, one of the things that struck me with the US was the sheer size of the market and volume of work being produced. Take the audio book industry - there are dozens of US production companies, so there are so many more opportunities. Those kinds of projects with really long studio hours where they want you to be present in their studios are tough if you're based in Sydney! We just don't have that same scale of opportunity here. As far as I know there is only one commercial audio book production company here.

"Recently I was trying to track down developers for a gaming company with Australian offices. After speaking to offices in three states I was told that development and voicing for characters would happen at one of their overseas offices, but which one would be dependant on the project [...] they couldn't really help me."

Our own government demonstrates a similar level of non-help. When asked what support her role receives by way of funding, her response is simple: "None that I am aware of."

And from there, the floodgates open up.

GIVE GAMES A CHANCE

One of the largest differences between how games are made in Australia and how they're made



Not all Australian games are successful

overseas is the level of government support, and everyone we talked to not only stated that Australia needs it, but deserves it.

Tom Crago sets the scene. "The Victorian and Queensland Governments have, for some years now, understood the contribution that the game development community makes, and have made efforts to support the industry. The Federal Government, sadly, has done nothing. Tens of millions of dollars are spent supporting our film and television industries, while the games industry lies alone and unloved in the corner, like that Gizmondo your Auntie bought you because she heard you liked video games."

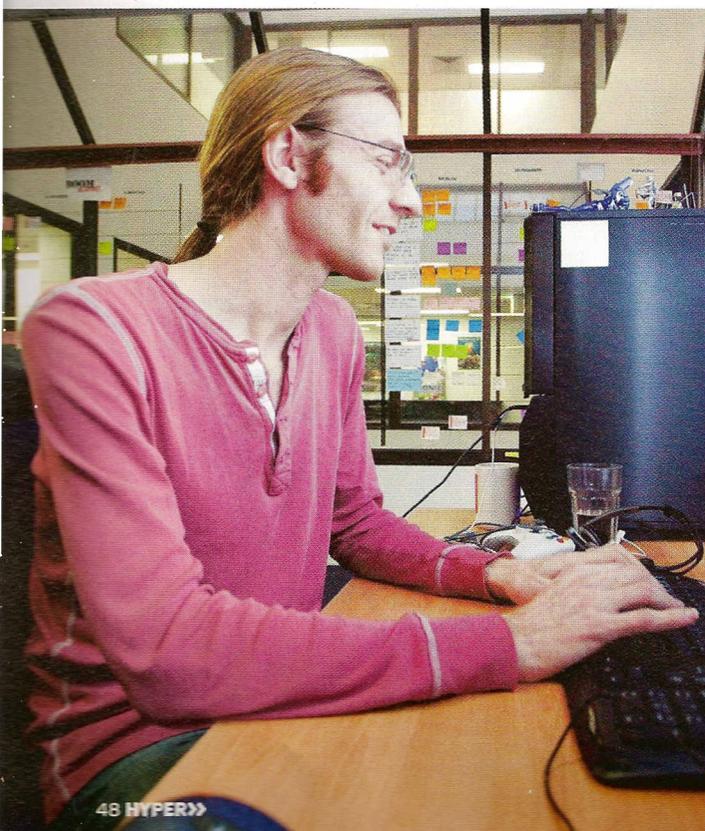
Dan Toose echoes Crago's thumbs-up for state governments, as well as his thumbs-down. "On a national level, there is no support, which is a far cry from places like Singapore or Canada where game

developers receive massive tax benefits to keep costs low enough to get up and running. The biggest entertainment funding sob story in this country is [that] game development doesn't get the 40% tax break the film industry gets, and even then the film-makers only get that if they can prove their film is Australia-focused, which is extremely limiting in terms of what creative ideas get backed. That said, Queensland Games and Invest Brisbane do offer grants and support to studios looking to get up and running, or fund projects, and Film Victoria also are very games industry friendly."

Peter Alexander agrees. "The government has done very little to support the Australian games industry. You will only receive any sort of backing for making games if those games are for film or television, or if you are researching

something. If you're *just* making games then that's not enough. The industry deserves more. We have the talent and the GDAA and IEAA have shown that Australians care about gaming. All Australia needs is some government support, so that we can become more globally competitive."

True, the IEAA has backed the games industry's desire to receive such support, and has proposed that a "common tax incentive" will give developers the sort of assistance that, as Toose explained, is already offered to filmmakers. Crago says that the GDAA is pleased that the IEAA is with them on this one. "All we're really saying here is that games should finally enjoy a level playing field with film and television. I'm sure anyone reading this mag agrees that times have changed, and that video games are now an important part of Australia's cultural and entertainment landscape. And yet still



YOU CAN CHECK IN...

Loyal Hyper followers might recognise Dan Toose's name from this very publication. Yes, he manned the editor's chair from 1997 to 1999, before realising that he'd rather help create games instead of just write about them. So we had to ask - does he still follow our humble mag?

"I do read Hyper now and then, but it's a 'time permitting' thing - I'm honestly too busy to read a lot of gaming media all the time beyond watching what's causing waves. My fondest memories from working on Hyper definitely are of my co-workers, particularly the art directors like Mark Gowing, Steve Scott, Brooke-Star Elliott and Malcolm Campbell - plus my fellow game journalists like Eliot Fish, Cam Shea, Kevin Cheung, Stuart Clarke and Ben Mansill. The other thing that I was definitely lucky to experience at Hyper was being on the front lines to cover the transition of gaming from a decidedly geeky pastime into a modern mainstream entertainment format."

His own transition - from game writer to games maker - also allows him to take in the development process from a unique perspective. "The biggest thing you notice is that there's almost always a rational reason as to why everything happens in game development, even if the developers can't really talk about it. It's very easy to break a good game by adding something that sounds cool, but in practice ruins or dilutes gameplay experiences. Developers don't have time to explain everything they do to the public, and sometimes they are made to work to deadlines or restrictions that stop them from doing what they believe to be the ideal thing. I'm sure there are some truly clueless developers out there, but most of them are very bright people who are very passionate about games, and you can bet they're more aware of the problems you spot in their games than anyone else."



our Government is under the spell of our film industry. Anyone with good reasons why this is the case should feel free to get in touch with me - for ten years I've been trying to figure it out.

"Will we eventually get that level playing field? Of course we will. The war, in fact, has already been won. Ask a fourteen year old what they do for fun and... actually, maybe don't ask them that question. The point is, though, that each year the dial shifts away from passive forms of entertainment, towards interactive entertainment. The great tragedy is that the Government has not recognised this trend. It represents a huge, lost opportunity for Australian game developers."

David Keep agrees, saying that to not provide support is to wave goodbye to a good opportunity. "The games industry provides a large number of jobs and brings in a lot of money from overseas markets so encouraging the growth of this industry would be a smart investment."

But as much as they might want government support, some aren't sure that it'll ever happen. "The fact of the matter is that the people that make these decisions still treat games as second-class citizens in the creative industries," says Alexander. "The GDA and IEAA have shown that Australia needs these incentives, that similar government support has worked in other countries, and that the games industry is just as, if not more, deserving that the film industry. The only obstacle that is preventing the proposal from becoming a reality is the prejudices of those that have the power to do so. Unfortunately, this obstacle is the hardest one to surmount, so I can't help but feel that we won't be seeing any positive action anytime soon."

BUY AUSTRALIAN!

So what can be done?

"I'd really encourage people to keep an eye out for Australian developed games, and to buy them if they're up to scratch," says Crago: You can also join me in jumping up and down in front of Government and calling for a better deal for the local industry."

David Keep agrees... to a degree. "Consumers can write to their MP urging them to support the common tax incentive proposal. Beyond that, sales help, but I wouldn't encourage people to spend their hard earned money on a title that didn't genuinely interest them... unless of course the product was as fairly priced as Spinfast's line of iPhone games, in which case I would say buy now, and tell your friends!"

Peter Alexander suggests a different tack. "I think the best thing consumers can do to support the growth of the industry is to become a part of it. One of my favourite things about game development is that anyone with a computer and access to the Internet can do it. All the resources, software, and information you need are freely available, so, if you want to do it, there's nothing stopping you."

And with that, it seems that the fact of Australian game development is in our hands. It's up to those who follow it to support it and become involved in it, and as we lobby the powers-that-be for more financial assistance, we look at a country that harbours so much potential within its shores, and so much desire to contribute beyond them. With the proper assistance, Australian game development can achieve some truly big things. ☞



"WE KNOW A REMOTE FARM IN LINCOLNSHIRE..."

Being a voice actor isn't as easy as sitting down in front of a microphone, saying "frozen peas" twenty times and receiving a bag of money. de Zylva warns one to prepare for a rollercoaster of ups and downs when considering such a career.

"Auditioning can be tough," she says. "You try to prepare as best you can, you're competing with many other voices, [and] there is the pressure of limited time to get it right. Often you'll only hear back if they want you, so it can be very disappointing - you've invested so much of yourself in it. You have to learn from it and move on without getting too down on yourself for not getting the gig."

It's also a job where repetition and frustration come hand in hand. "I think I may have spent two hours trying to get a line right. Thankfully I was in my own home studio, so I had the time to play with it until I got what I wanted. Self-direction can be tricky - it is often easier to have an objective view from a producer/audio engineer giving you feedback. That said, I would have felt much more pressure in a commercial studio where time really is money."

And as for the toughest tongue-twistingest line that de Zylva has encountered? "How about... 'with some species of Mimulus, the aestivation is almost as frequently that of the Rhinanthideae as of the Antirrhinideae...'" from an audio book version of Charles Darwin's 'On the Origin of the Species'. His sentences can go on for almost an A4 page."

Creative Assembly have a reputation for quality

"I'd really encourage people to keep an eye out for Australian developed games, and to buy them if they're up to scratch," says Crago

