CLIMAX STUDIOS

The work-for-hire studio that's reinventing itself at the forefront of VR production

BY BEN MAXWELL

To gain access to Climax Studios' premises, we have to enter a four-digit code into a jury-rigged keypad that sits above the lift's standard controls. And as if to further underscore this company's relationship with videogames, the numbers on the four keys that we need are all but rubbed off, while the remaining buttons look brand new. We've seen this obstacle in games before and, using a combination of the smarts gained from a recent fortnight spent breaking into buildings as Adam Jensen and, er, the receptionist telling us which combination to use, we ascend to the office unhindered. That your first act on entering the building immediately calls to mind a videogame puzzle is appropriate, but those worn-away buttons also suggest a longstanding routine.

Until recently, such a charge could be reasonably levelled at the studio. This is, after all, an independent company that owes its 28 years of stability to a solid foundation of work-for-hire projects. Its first credits, in fact, were late-'90s console ports of *Warcraft II: Tides Of Darkness* and *Diablo*, but Climax has produced its fair share of original work, too. After acquiring Brighton-based Pixel Planet in 1999, later renamed Climax Racing (a studio that went on to become the now-defunct Black Rock Studios after its acquisition by what was then Buena Vista Games in 2006), the group released a series of racers including *Rally Fusion: Race Of Champions*, *ATV Quad Power Racing* and seven *MotoGP* games. An early shot at an MMORPG based on the Warhammer universe, started in 2002, went awry when Games Workshop pulled the plug on funding, but the JRPG-inspired *Sudeki* emerged in 2004 unscathed.

One of Climax's most notable moves, however, was taking the reins from Konami's Team Silent, a switch that manifested in 2007's *Silent Hill: Origins*, which originated in LA but was brought over to Portsmouth after a troubled start. At the time, *Her Story* writer and director Sam Barlow headed up a Climax team that rewrote the script, redesigned the levels and remade all of the creatures in the space of a week. Konami was pleased with the 2007 release, earning Climax a reputation as a pair of safe hands, and the breathing room to create *Shattered Memories*, a reimagining of the original game. Konami's new-found trust in the studio also led to other collaborations with Climax, including *Rocket Knight* and the PC port of *Castlevania: Lords Of Shadow*.

The *Balloon Chair Death Match* team, headed up by Jolyon Leonard (far right). Climax's small teams change regularly

The studio's growing reputation and expertise landed it work with other prominent publishers too, leading to *Eyepet & Friends*, the PS3 and Vita versions of *Resogun*, and *Dead Nation*'s PS4 and Vita iterations. It's also behind the *Assassin's Creed Chronicles* trilogy, a 2.5D spinoff from the main series spanning China, India and Russia. Over the past three years, however, the studio has undergone something of a metamorphosis, ditching large team

into it now. With things like Daydream and even Google Cardboard we've been able to operate in that space from a position of knowledge and experience and say, 'Yeah, we know what we're doing here', because we've built considerable experience and expertise that has enabled us to spread our net in the VR space."

Indeed, the studio has embraced the technology wholeheartedly and with gleeful platform agnosticism. Alongside several Rift ports, Climax has put out WWII shooters *Bandit Six* and sequel *Bandit Six: Salvo* on Gear VR, while *Gunsight* will bring retro-themed run-and-gun

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structures in favour of multiple, smaller projects – it currently has nine games in the works – and a zealous focus on VR and AR.

"It's nice to be at the cutting edge for once," CEO **Simon Gardner** tells us. "We missed the boat with mobile – we were just way too slow. There's a lot of work in those early days, and it doesn't necessarily make financial sense when you look at it on paper. So you think, 'I'll wait a bit'. Then, by the time you jump in, you have such a lot of catching up to do. So really that was one of the drivers for us for getting into VR. I was like, 'I'm not going to miss this – let's just do it'.

"But we were lucky – more through accident than design, if I'm honest. We've always been reasonably careful, and that's why we're 28 years old. We only started with one VR title, then very rapidly began our second on Oculus. We kind of fell into the mobile side of it with our Gear VR stuff and – certainly from the revenue potential and installed base in the short term – we've lucked out there. We've been doing VR for three years, and most people are only jumping

action to the platform, taking inspiration from the *Metal Slug* games and the Transformers animated series. *Towers For Tango* is a *SimTower*-esque construction and management sim by Climax's Auckland team, using Google's Tango AR technology to bring its little people to life. *Balloon Chair Death Match* for Vive sees players try to shoot out each other's flotation aids with a revolver while navigating a high-rise city. The studio is also working on an unannounced project for Google's forthcoming Daydream.

"We've had to learn flexibility," Gardner says. "We don't start an 80-person project now and think, 'OK, that's it for the next three-and-a-half years'. That will change, of course – as this technology expands, the teams will grow and the projects will get bigger. But at the moment, the teams are about ten people, peaking at between 15 and 25 depending on the size of the project. That's tiny compared to a console game."

That shift has had an inevitable and profound effect on the studio culture that defines Climax, which has found a new lease of life since ▶

Climax is expanding as it moves to maintain its place at the head of the emerging VR market. Thanks to sizeable investment in the sector, the studio has lined up a wide range of VR and AR projects, and CEO Simon Gardner expects the audience for such titles to grow rapidly

focusing on VR and AR. A number of staff have moved on to other companies as the opportunities to work on larger console projects dropped off, and Gardner and his management team have repositioned former specialists into new, more generalised roles as new working practices have been adopted.

"It's been a great opportunity to promote people within the studio, to give them more responsibility within projects," Gardner says. "I'm a great believer in giving people a go at stuff and helping them – giving them the opportunities so they can expand their abilities, and it keeps their job fresh and interesting."

"When we started *Gunsight*, it felt exactly like when I first started in the industry making games on PS1," says **Ian Hudson**, *Gunsight*'s lead designer. "The biggest team I worked on was probably *Split/Second*, and there were 100-and-something people on that, and it was over two floors of the office. *Gunsight* is just a few rows of desks, and things get changed really quickly – you can try things without affecting loads of other people, and decisions are made quickly as a result."

Having so many teams in the same building means that collaboration is easy, giving teams a leg up when they collide with UI or gameplay issues in VR that another team has solved previously. But it has also brought about a more tumultuous distribution of talent as employees intermingle and switch teams as projects and deadlines require – a system that also has social benefits, since everyone gets to work with everyone else, rather than existing in silos.

"When you work in smaller teams, you get more ownership of your stuff, and people care and are more motivated, which is reflected in the end product," says **Jolyon Leonard**, senior designer on *Balloons*. "[And working with VR]

blows a whole bunch of traditional game design ideas out of the window – they just don't work any more. You have all these problems and you don't know how to fix them, so I'm having to learn everything from scratch again. I love it – it's rekindled my love for my job."

While Climax has found a comfortable space in which to operate, switching from a predominantly work-for-hire studio to a market that, despite huge corporate and publisher investment, remains an unproven one, might be seen as a risky approach. Gardner, however, takes a different view of the situation.

"I don't think we've felt vulnerable at all in this transition," he says. "The exact opposite, in fact –

often get brought in by the publisher to add our expertise and knowledge. That's not to say we're better than they are, it's just we can maybe focus on something that then frees up the team to finish the game. Bug fixing, for example, or content creation. Interface is another big thing we do – it's a big part of how you get information across. Because we use multiple engines, we've got lots of experience across platforms, and those are skills we've honed over 30 years."

Gardner's excitement for the future, and his obvious pride in Climax's achievements and the people that work here, are tempered by a modesty that runs through the company's DNA. This is a studio that's happy to help others

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it's just filled us with confidence. Be under no illusion: even porting a game is really hard and technically difficult. And we have some of the best people in coding working in the game industry because the types of things they have to do are so complex. But the people we've got have been able to take this stuff in their stride. Yes, it's all new, but it hasn't felt risky at all."

And Climax hasn't entirely abandoned its past. During our visit, we also see a couple of as-yet-unannounced traditional console projects in development. Meanwhile, the studio's formidable technical knowledge has positioned it as a kind of unsung hero of the industry.

"We're doing engineering work for people all the time – it's something we rarely get recognition for," Gardner says. "If other companies are having problems, we quite

achieve their best work without taking any of the credit, and Gardner's outward confidence in Climax's grasp of VR shouldn't be mistaken for unchecked arrogance.

"It's always nice when people know about things that you've made and things that you're doing – getting recognition from your peer group," he says when we ask about how he sees the company's profile today. "It's nice when people say, 'Hey, I've heard you guys are doing some really interesting stuff'. We didn't get that when Climax was a work-for-hire studio. And we genuinely do believe that [VR and AR] is going to turn into something that touches everybody's lives. But we'll see how we do with *Balloon Chair Death Match*. If it's the success we hope it will be, then that will open a new chapter on where we're going." ■

1 *Rocket Knight* was the
third game in Konami's
series, which began in the
16bit days. 2 *Gunsight* is a
shooter in which you target
enemies by looking at them.
3 Initially released on PSP,
Silent Hill: Origins was a
prequel to the original
game. 4 A fluffy asset from
a Climax-built showcase of
Amazon's Lumberyard
engine VR tech. 5 The
Assassin's Creed Chronicles
trilogy puts a 2.5D spin on
the series. 6 *Silent Hill:
Shattered Memories* was a
new take on the original
title. 7 *Smart As…* is a
brain-training game for Vita.
8 AR title *Towers For Tango*