

with 'LawBreakers' Creator Cliff Bleszinski

By Giancarlo Valdes

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Raleigh, North Carolina probably isn't the first place you think of when it comes to people who make games. But if you spend some time in its rapidly growing downtown area, you might just run into a few nice developers who are working on a bloody sci-fi shooter.

LawBreakers publisher Nexon recently flew me out to North Carolina's capital to try the frenetic 5-on-5 multiplayer game releasing on PC later this year. In *LawBreakers*, characters can manipulate gravity and blow each other to smithereens in a world that's undergone a drastic transformation after secret government experiments destroyed the moon. Known as The Shattering, the event triggered a wave of devastating natural disasters back on earth, and it permanently screwed up the planet's gravity.

Independent developer Boss Key Productions designed *LawBreakers* as a modern version of the old fast-paced shooters, like *Quake* and *Unreal Tournament*, that defined PC gaming in the '90s. Death is swift and brutal. Anti-gravity zones in the multiplayer levels introduce a type of learning curve not seen in other first-person games. You have to come up with some inventive ways to move around and kill your enemies while slowly floating in zero-G.

Sorry, the Wayback Machine does not have this video (96AXeniQ-jA) archived/indexed.

I quickly learned that *LawBreakers* isn't the kind of game to jump into if you're tired. I played a handful of matches against YouTube personalities and other members of the press, and I like to think exhaustion played a huge part in my terrible performance. My flight arrived late the night before the preview event, and between that and a little jet lag, I wasn't able to get much sleep. But getting my hands on *LawBreakers* wasn't the only reason for my incredibly quick 19-hour stay on the east coast.

I was also there to talk to Boss Key co-founder and chief executive Cliff Bleszinski. At one point, Bleszinski left the games industry to retire. But like an aging NFL quarterback who just can't seem to stay away from football, Bleszinski couldn't resist coming back to the business where he made his name. He returned not only with a new game, but as evident in our conversation, a new sense of purpose as well.

HOMECOMING



Like me, Bleszinski came in from Los Angeles the night before the press tour. That's why, when I sat down for my interview with him and chief operating officer Arjan Brussee, he told me he was so beat. I couldn't tell. While I needed tea and energy drinks to keep me awake throughout the day, Bleszinski sounded like he was running on pure excitement. Our half-hour discussion flew by as he spoke in brisk yet informative bursts.

"The kids don't remember [the *Quake* level] Ziggurat Vertigo or [the multiplayer map] Morpheus from *Unreal Tournament*," Bleszinski said when I asked him about coming up with the premise for *LawBreakers*. "The trend that I was seeing in your average *Call of Duty* was they were taking features that were in games like *Unreal Tournament* and *Quake III* years ago and being like, 'Oh, now you can double-jump!' And the kids were like, 'Wow, double-jump!' I'm like, 'That's easy. We can do that.'"

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“That’s my 10-to-15-year rule: Every 10 to 15 years, you can take a mechanic, IP [intellectual property] or world and dust it off for a whole new generation of gamers. They don’t remember it because they didn’t grow up with it.”

The 41-year-old game designer has an impressive résumé. He made his fame and fortune while working at developer Epic Games, joining the company when he was only 17. At Epic, he made games like *Jazz Jackrabbit*, *Unreal* and its multiplayer spin-off series *Unreal Tournament*. But he’s perhaps best known as the creator of the over-the-top *Gears of War* series.

His outgoing personality and countless media appearances turned him into one of the industry’s few celebrity-like figures. For many fans, Bleszinski was the face of Epic Games.

For better or worse, he also became known for his candid opinions (some of his online detractors wouldn’t hesitate to call him arrogant, among other adjectives). You only have to look at his Twitter account to see how quickly his thoughts—often filled with vulgarities—can spark outrage among folks in the gaming community.



But when I met Bleszinski for the first time in Raleigh, I wasn't thinking about the incendiary comments, his expensive Lamborghinis or any other part of his seemingly lavish lifestyle. At that moment, he was just another developer who couldn't wait to see how people would react to his new game.

"It's exciting. It's a little scary," he said about striking out on his own with a small team. "But I always like to quote Pixar: 'If we're not a little nervous, we're not doing our jobs.' And I always like to say anything worth doing in life is work. There's a lot of moments with game dev life that are good and bad, but walking around [here] and seeing people enjoy [the game] and hearing that hooting and hollering—it's awesome. It makes me happy we did this."

the eyes of a character.”

“Sometimes, it’s the best way to flow through a world in a game like this,” he added.

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**It literally felt like the first day of
school—in a good way.**
”

Cliff Bleszinski

“Flow” is the most economical way to describe *LawBreakers*. While the playable characters on both sides of the conflict have their own personalities and backstories, the gameplay is symmetrical: The Laws and the Breakers have access to the same roles and abilities. Some of the roles are much better at moving through the world than others. Kitsune, for example, is an Assassin, which means she has a pair of swords that can turn into laser-powered grappling hooks. After a few minutes of getting used to her play style, I was able to swing around a Grand Canyon-based level like a homicidal Spider-Woman, only touching the ground intermittently to slice my foes.

I had considerably less success with the slow-moving Cronos, a beast of a man with tentacle-like tubes protruding from his black mask. He’s a Titan, a type of character who has a ton of health and a powerful rocket launcher. This eclectic mix of abilities and characters makes *LawBreakers* a game that has, as Bleszinski likes to call it, a lot of drama. It’s that kind of edge-of-your-seat tension—the potential to stage amazing comebacks or experience crushing defeats—that he hopes will keep players glued to the game.

In addition to Bleszinski’s name and credentials, Boss Key is also betting that *LawBreaker*’s bloody aesthetic will help it stand out from its brightly colored rivals. It’s part of an increasingly crowded sub-genre of competitive online games—including *Overwatch*, *Battleborn*, *Paragon*, and others—that give players plenty of unique characters to fight with. Since they’re all somewhat similar, it remains to be seen which of them, if any, will actually find a sustainable community.

DON’T CALL IT A COMEBACK



After two decades at Epic Games, Bleszinski decided to leave the company. In a farewell note to his colleagues, the game designer wrote about how overworked he felt and that it was time “for a much needed break.” His original intention was to retire. He saved enough money to “sit by my pool and get fat for a while.”

The break lasted just six months. As he spent his time off consuming different TV shows, movies, comic books and novels, the idea for *LawBreakers* started forming in his head. He had to come back and make this game.

Bleszinski reunited with Brussee (whose role as a programmer on *Jazz Jackrabbit* kicked off his career), and together they hammered out a PowerPoint presentation they could show to potential publishing partners. They spent a year looking for funding. Eventually, they struck a deal with the Japanese gaming company Nexon, secured office space, and on a late summer day in 2014, officially opened up Boss Key Productions.

“I remember carrying my backpack with my laptop in it because we didn’t even have [desktop] computers yet...I hadn’t been awake before noon in some time,” Bleszinski said, chuckling. “I got up at a reasonable hour. I remember the feeling of walking out of the garage, kissing my wife goodbye, and it literally felt like the first day of school—in a good way. Like, ‘My god, something’s happening right now.’”

different rooms, with only a wide, creaky staircase to unite them. Some doors still serve as reminders of the former residents: I passed by a handwritten sign that had “Justice of the Peace” in stylized lettering. If it weren’t for the fancy PCs and equipment behind those doors, I would’ve sworn I had just traveled back in time.

I met a flurry of Boss Key employees during my abbreviated tour of the office. My guide, art director Tramell Isaac, pointed out a few neat items as we walked across the building’s hardwood floors. The studio has gender-neutral bathrooms, which Isaac told me was Bleszinski’s way of sticking it to North Carolina Gov. Pat McCrory over **the contentious Bathroom Law**. This fuck-you gesture even extend into the game itself:

Gender neutral bathrooms in our new game, @PatMcCroryNC. It takes place in the future, unlike the past you envision. pic.twitter.com/OPfXFyuZ70
— Cliff Bleszinski (@therealcliffyb) **May 6, 2016**

The developers also have a small, makeshift shrine on a bookshelf dedicated to Bleszinski’s changing looks over the years. It has old pictures of Bleszinski standing next to photos of Hall & Oates. Isaac said it’s “mostly us fucking with him.”

“We keep it real light up in here,” he continued.

However, the office’s “pièce de résistance”—Isaac paused for dramatic effect before opening up a mysterious box—is their ice cream stash. Whenever someone messes up a work-in-progress version of the game, that person owes everybody on the so-called “cream team” (nine people including Isaac) a pint of ice cream. It’s the art director’s clever way of ensuring that he has a never-ending supply of frozen treats.

Bleszinski’s fondness for Raleigh goes beyond just working inside a historic landmark. When he first moved to the city in 1998, downtown was deserted, and it hardly had any foot traffic. Nowadays, it’s flourishing with restaurants, bars, coffee shops and new apartments. Bleszinski likes to tell his employees that their office isn’t limited to the building itself: It’s the entire downtown area. He takes pride in the fact that Boss Key is currently the only software company in a sea of bankers and lawyers.

In a way, Raleigh is also a reflection of Bleszinski’s life. He practically grew up in the games industry. And just as Raleigh evolved in the past 20 years, so, too, has its longtime resident.

Brussee, Isaac, producer Chris Mielke, and the other Boss Key department heads are part of Bleszinski’s own “Avengers” team. The CEO told me the company wouldn’t be able to exist without them.



"I've got a good crew. I still get to be Iron Man, though," Bleszinski said.

season six premiere of *Game of Thrones* in Hollywood. At the star-studded after-party, they met a few of the show's cast members (some of them for the second time). They also happened to run into famed entrepreneur and engineer Elon Musk. The meeting left Bleszinski "shaking".

But as much as he likes visiting the west coast, he's glad that both his job and his home are still in Raleigh, where he enjoys the seasonal weather and the "ridiculous" affordability. As both the creator and hype man for *LawBreakers*, he gets to live in both worlds: The glitz and glamour of big cities and the relative peacefulness of the South.

"I dip into L.A., go to the *Game of Thrones* premiere—'What's up, Elon Musk?'—and then get the fuck back to make video games," said Bleszinski.

I can't blame him for bragging about it.

Giancarlo Valdes is a freelance writer based in southern California. He spends an unhealthy amount of time thinking about the past. If you'd like to confess your own awkward AIM stories, you can find him on Twitter @boogs.

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