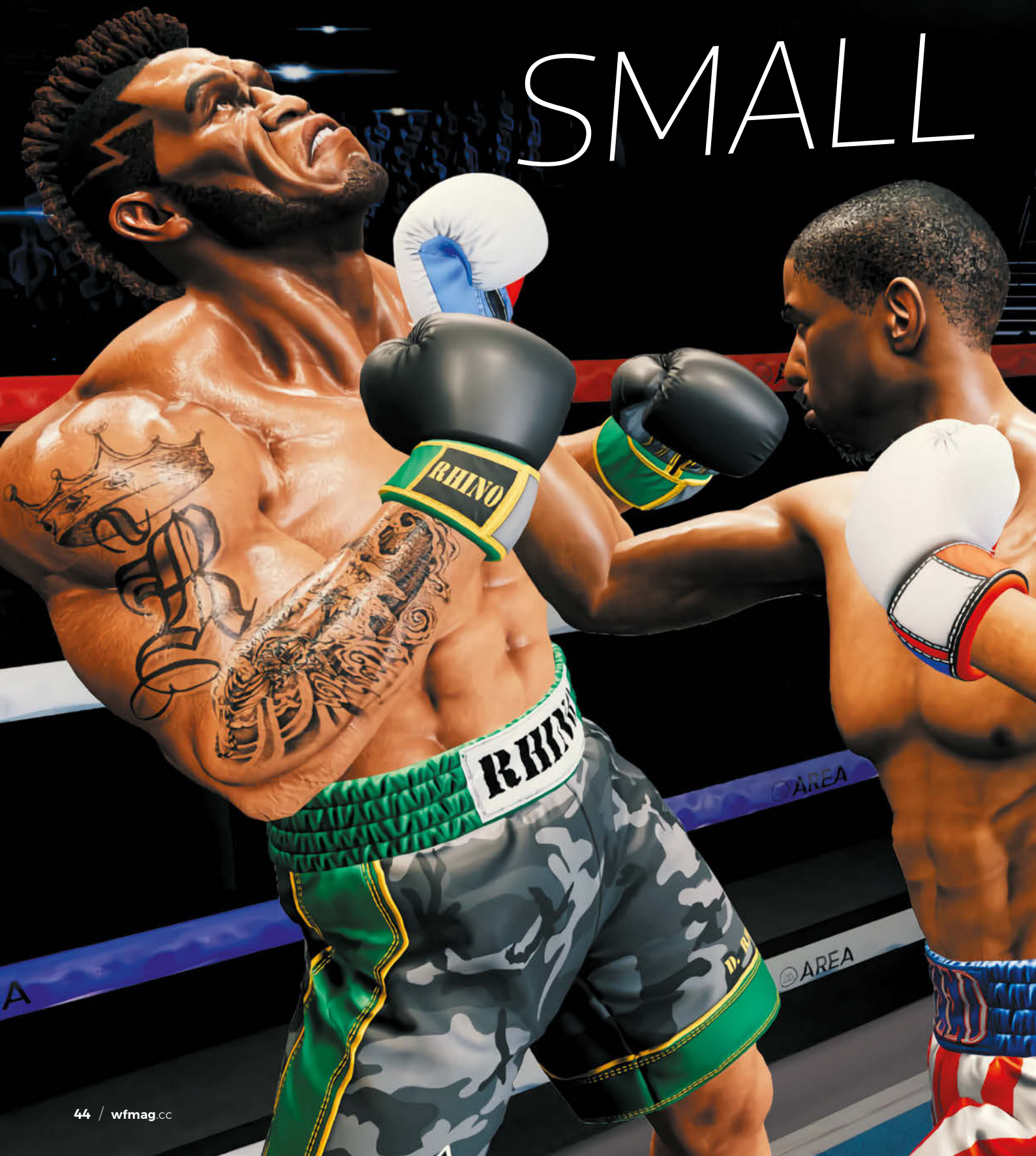


SMALL



TEAM BIG LICENCE

Inside the tiny studios making games based on giant Hollywood properties

WRITTEN BY
AARON POTTER

+ **W** hile there's definitely an upside to making a game based on a highly revered film, TV, or comic book, for the longest time, development teams working on licensed video games did so knowing that it came with a certain stigma attached. Known in industry circles for having much tighter production schedules and deadlines, games based on recognisable properties have long been synonymous with poor quality and a broad streak of cynicism.

+ Of course, not all licensed games are bad. Rocksteady's *Arkham* series gave players the thrill of being Batman; 2014's *Alien: Isolation* recreated the aesthetic of Ridley Scott's 1979 movie in painstaking (and chilling) detail, and the recently released *Fallen Order* has been praised in some quarters as the best *Star Wars* game from EA to date. But for every one of these home runs, there's a dud like the assorted *Iron Man* tie-ins from 2008, or the widely derided *Aliens: Colonial Marines*, released in 2013. Whether they're good, bad, or indifferent, triple-A licensed games will always exist in some capacity. But as we enter an era of gaming where more and more creatives are breaking away to form smaller studios, we're now seeing what can happen when tiny teams get to work on some of the most famous IPs in the world.

+ One such team is Illfonic, a Colorado-based developer currently working on the PlayStation exclusive *Predator: Hunting Grounds*, due out later this year. Before that, though, Illfonic first set Twitch streams alight with the asymmetrical action of 2017's *Friday the 13th: The Game*, which saw a team of player-controlled camp counsellors fend off the formidable Jason Voorhees. ➤

◀ Taking place between the first two *Creed* films, *Creed: Rise to Glory* allowed players to immerse themselves in the ring as Adonis Creed.

BEYOND THE B-MOVIE

When *Friday the 13th* was in development, there were just 50 artists and designers working on it. But the advantages of having a comparatively small team like Illfonic work on such a colossal IP became instantly clear for its CEO, Charles Brungardt. "We're small enough that talking as a group and getting feedback or ideas from each other doesn't get lost," he explains. "We can also move pretty fast when it comes to trying out ideas. We don't get lost in a ton of red tape, and it allows key stakeholders to have a direct relationship with the IP holders to make the game as true to the licence as possible."

Illfonic's *Friday the 13th* was by no means the first attempt at translating the slasher franchise into a game, but the studio's seven-on-one multiplayer approach made perfect sense for the franchise, and showcased an inspired understanding of the original property. Indeed, the asymmetrical setup proved so successful the first time around that it made sense for the team to see if lightning could strike twice with their next game, *Predator: Hunting Grounds*. "Asymmetric games can break a lot of rules in game design, but making it all work together

A BADASS BARBIE GAME?

WayForward's Adam Tierney is of the firm belief that any licensed game can be good – it's just a matter of taking the right approach. "I think bad licensed games happen when a developer either 'phones it in' or doesn't provide the production with enough time and resources," he says. "It's the notion that, 'This is a Barbie game, so we don't have to try that hard.' WayForward's Barbie games are some of our most fun and inspired licensed games, with surprisingly badass gameplay mechanics. The way our studio is structured is that each game project we take on is one of our directors' babies for the next twelve-plus months."

is rewarding," Brungardt says. "They excite us because of the fun, but also the challenge it presents by putting two different games together and watching the chaos that can result when people play it. It's also different than the norm of the industry."

NEW TECHNOLOGIES

Based in Los Angeles, Survios is another studio that's attempted to do new things with a movie licence. In 2018, it took its experience of making virtual reality games like *Raw Data* and *Sprint Vector*, and applied them to the evergreen *Rocky* franchise with the first-person boxing title, *Creed: Rise to Glory*. Allowing players to take on the role of boxer Adonis Creed, the game certainly has a layer of Hollywood gloss to it, but Survios co-founder James Iliff points out that the game wouldn't have been made had the *Rocky* property not been right for what the studio wanted to make.

In terms of the team's approach in selecting an IP, "we focus first and foremost about building a great game," Iliff explains. "We then look at IP that also makes sense for gameplay in an abstract sense, and then sometimes we put those two things together. There are undoubtedly movies and shows that are more naturally conducive to the interactive medium than others. A movie IP most certainly has to make sense in the imagination as connecting with some kind of core mechanic, whether that be action, puzzles, stealth, racing, or some other unique mash-up."

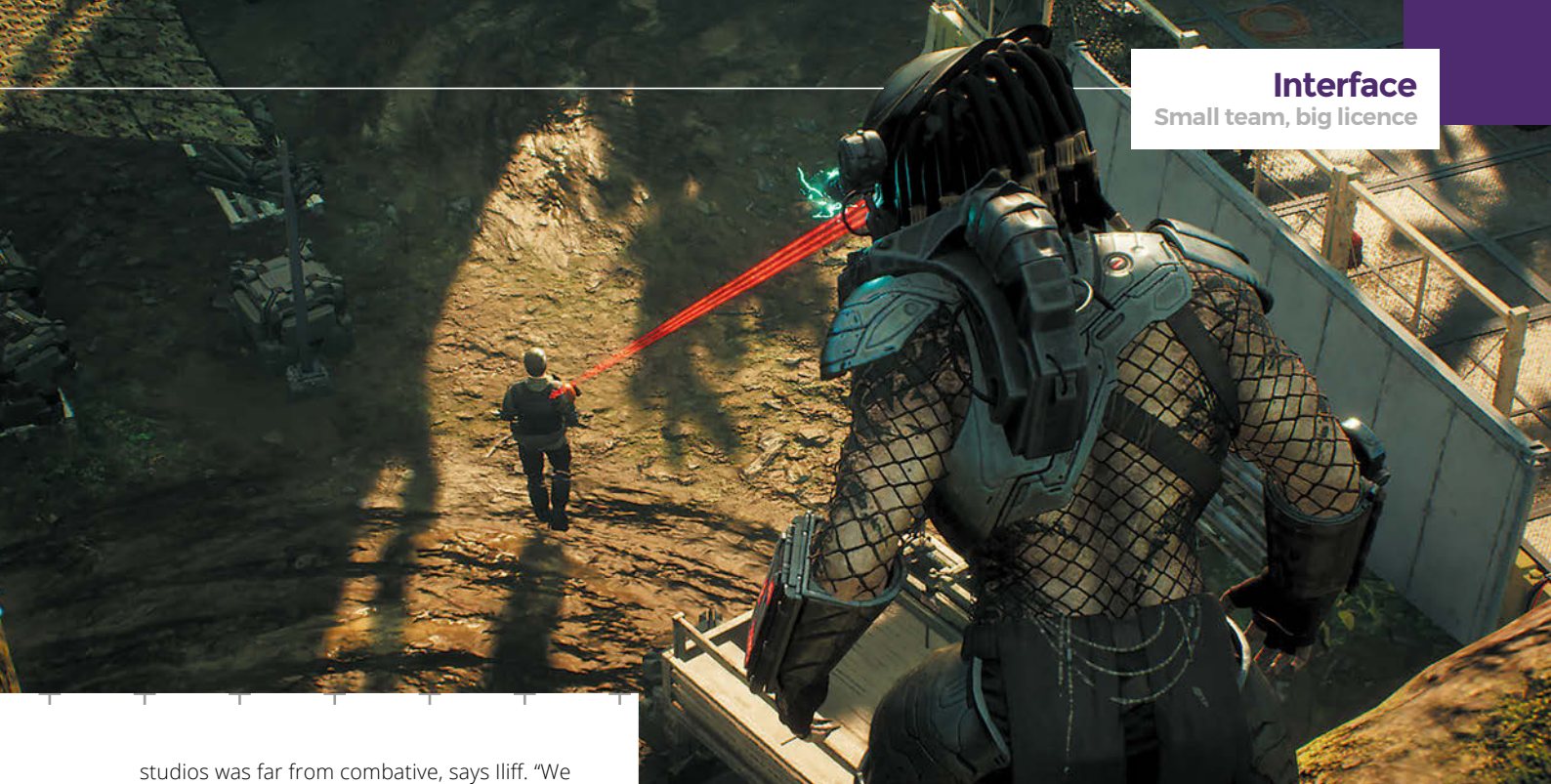
Comprising around 50 employees, Survios is another small studio – at least in comparison to MGM, the Hollywood behemoth that owns the *Rocky* licence. But unlike the David-and-Goliath scenarios that regularly play out in the *Rocky* movies, the relationship between the two



▲ *Friday the 13th: The Game* translates Jason's impressive killing capabilities as a hunting vision useful for chasing the seven other camp counsellors.



▲ *Aliens: Infestation* was released two years earlier than 2013's ill-fated *Aliens: Colonial Marines*, and aptly captured the *Aliens* universe.



▲ The asymmetrical multiplayer worked so well the first time around, that *Predator: Hunting Grounds* will sport the same setup alongside a flurry of new game mechanics.

studios was far from combative, says Iliff. “We loved working with MGM,” he enthuses. “It’s been fascinating to craft an experience that made sense in VR; we got to try new things, like giving you a ghost avatar with the phantom melee system, allowing you to get knocked out of your body, and other mechanics to simulate the intensity of a fight.”

SIZE MATTERS NOT

Two years before the aforementioned *Aliens: Colonial Marines* left players shuddering for all the wrong reasons in 2013, a smaller game based on the same licence – *Aliens: Infestation* – emerged on the Nintendo DS. Making the most of its handheld platform’s limitations, *Infestation* was a tense and focused

2D platformer, with its exploration, shooting, and tidy pixel graphics underpinned by a devious mechanic: once a member of the player’s party was dead, they were gone

for good. It was another sterling effort from Californian developer WayForward Technologies, a studio with a deserved reputation for making both original and licensed games.

Together with lead designer Cole Phillips, director Adam Tierney came up with *Aliens: Infestation* by going back and rewatching James Cameron’s original film. It was, Tierney says, a case of “breaking down the structure” of 1986’s *Aliens* and “trying to recreate the experience.”

“What we realised, rewatching *Aliens*, is that it’s basically a slasher horror film,” Tierney says. “Cameron sets the audience up by making them fall in love with these charismatic soldiers in the first half of the film, then kills them off one by one in the second half.”

“On recent games I’ve directed, my teams have been as large as 30-plus people, and as small as three people”

As well as *Infestation* and its original *Shantae* series, WayForward has worked with a range of other licences over the years, including *Batman* and *Barbie*, and a terrific 2D Metroidvania based on Tom Cruise’s ill-fated 2017 film, *The Mummy*. When asked how WayForward decides which property would work as a game, Tierney explains that the answer isn’t all that complex. “Believe it or not, the number one factor usually boils down to, ‘Because one of us thinks it’s cool,’” he

says. “A lot of the brands we pursue are often ones based on toys, shows, or films we grew up with, recent brands we love, or classic gaming brands that influenced us. If a brand is available to

create a game, whether it’s one that’s suggested to us by a publisher, or a brand that our studio actively seeks out, it tends to get the most excitement and traction – and ultimately, the likelihood of becoming an actual project.”

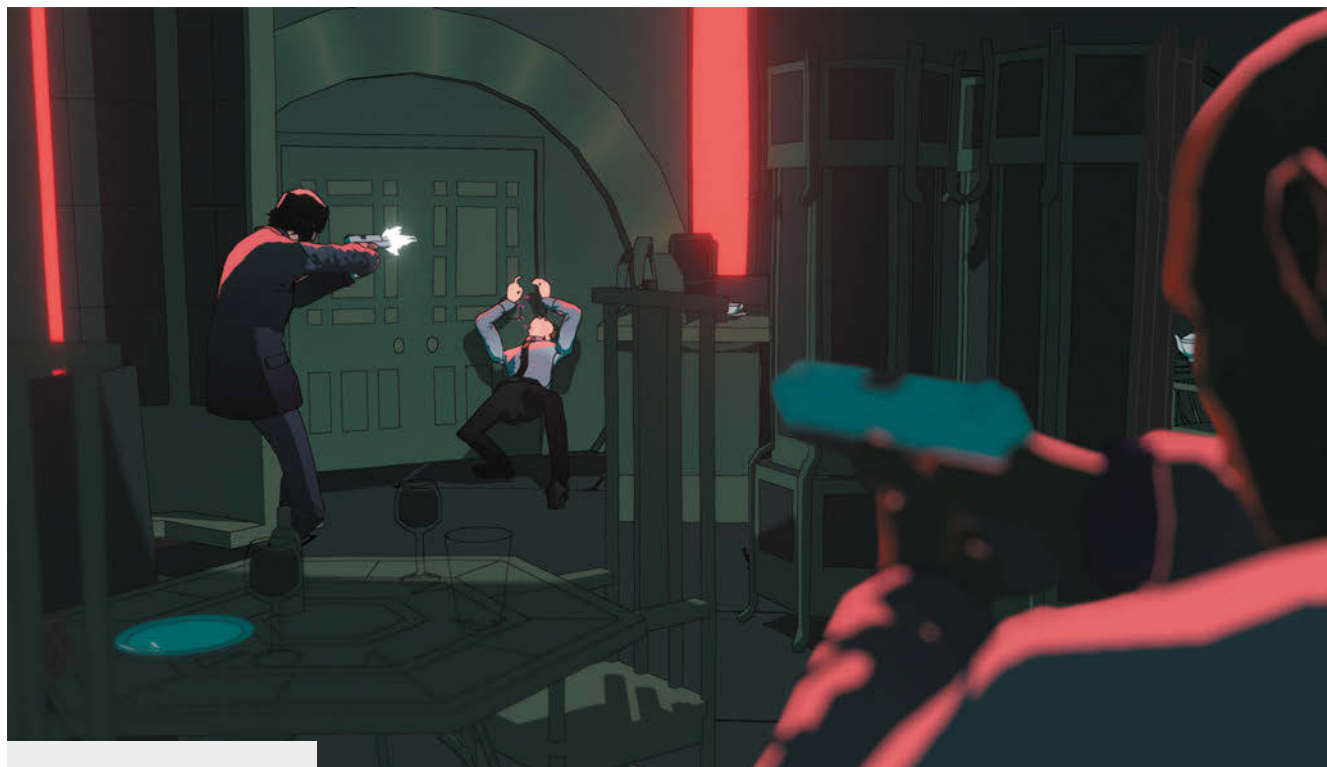
Passion is important, but part of the reason that WayForward has achieved so much success working with licensed material, Tierney suggests, is also because they’ve perfected the art of multitasking. The studio might be small by triple-A standards, but its team of 150 can be working on as many as four different games at the same time. “It all depends on what the production needs,” he says. “On recent games I’ve directed, my teams have been as large as 30-plus people, and as small as three people.”

WORKING WITH THE WACHOWSKIS

David Perry is a game development legend most known for creating the *Earthworm Jim* series, but he’s also developed games based on licences like *The Terminator* and *McDonald’s*. Most notably he helped develop 2003’s *Enter the Matrix* on PS2 – a time he thinks back to quite fondly.

“It was fun having movie directors designing a video game,” Perry says. “Those two [the Wachowskis] are just incredibly creative, smart, and love video games. I’m not aware of any time before that where the directors considered the video game a part of making the movies. It was certainly the pinnacle for me, and I was known for working on movie games.”





JOHN WICK HEX

Released last year, *John Wick Hex* epitomises the 'big licence, tiny studio' paradigm. Based on the hit Keanu Reeves action movies, *Hex* is a novel action-strategy title created by the 30-strong Bithell Games. "As a studio, we've been approached about IP stuff before, and our internal process has always been only to pitch the idea we think is too interesting or too daft for them to actually do," studio founder and game director Mike Bithell told us back in issue 22. "We pitched for one big IP, and we got a response from a very important person at the IP owners' company, which was just 'LOL' and no other comment after that... We did the same with *John Wick* – we took it as an excuse to make a game we thought had an interesting concept that we'd like to make. Then we took it to Hollywood and met everyone, and people liked it... it wasn't just your standard licensed game where you slap a logo on it."

Tierney is quick to mention that art style plays a key factor in determining these needs. There are some instances where a lot of talent is required, such as when the team uses an aesthetic he dubs '2D HD art' – as seen in 2010's *Batman: The Brave and the Bold* on the Wii. "In the case of our *Batman* game, we were trying to emulate the experience of watching a TV episode, but also make it just a bit more interactive – a playable episode, we called it. To achieve this, we needed a very large team of animators, artists, and programmers, as well as heavy collaboration with Warner Bros. Animation. We wouldn't have been able to match the style and tone of the TV series with a small team."

A game like *Aliens: Infestation*, then, was one of those special projects where the platform it was being developed for meshed well with the more pared-back art style and markedly tinier team working on it. WayForward could work and iterate faster because of this, all while still maintaining a high bar of quality. "A key difference between those two styles is that, with pixel art, we could add new animations and ideas into the game in a matter of hours," says

Tierney, "whereas the 2D HD style on *Batman* might take a week's turnaround to get new elements into the game, because of how that art style is produced."

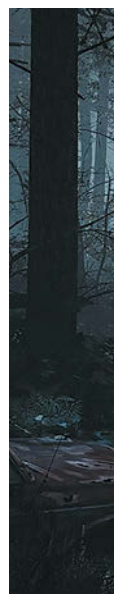
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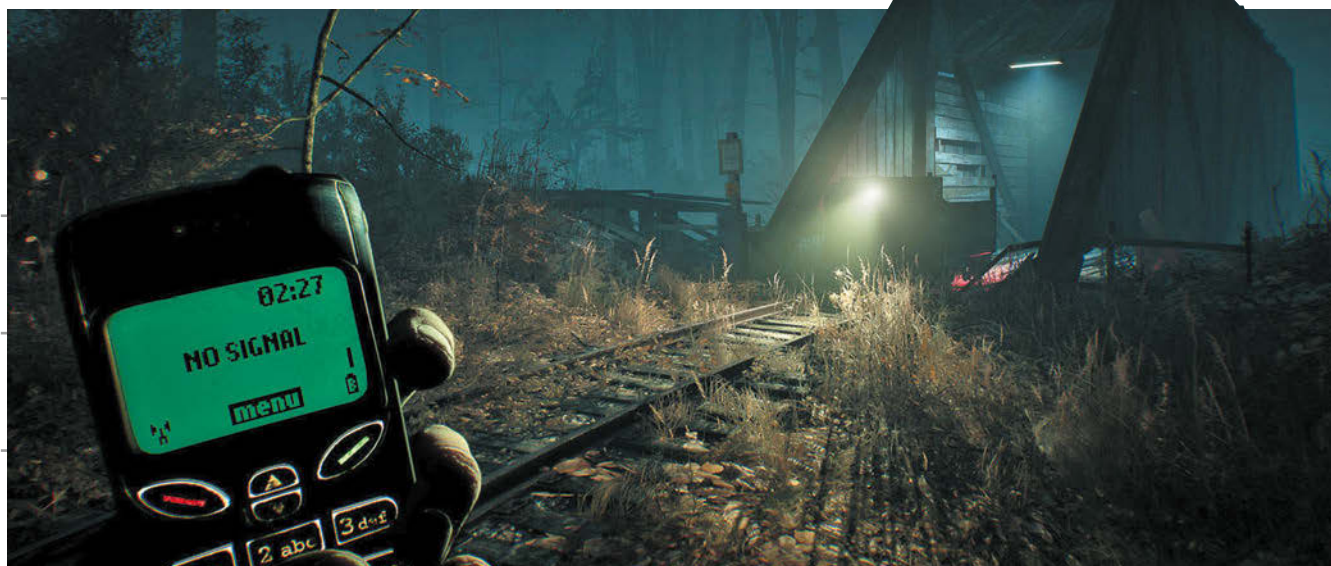
Licensed games frequently have a difficult path ahead of them: not only do they have to stand up as playable games in their own right, but they

also have to fit into the property or brand they're associated with. This was something the 30-strong Bloober Team had at the front of their minds when they made their *Blair*

Witch game. "It's such a perfect match," explains the studio's brand manager, Grzegorz Wilczek. "Bloober Team is all about psychological, disturbing horror games. *Blair Witch* is a horror movie series with a particularly deep lore. It all fits together so well, and we just had to make it happen. And 2019 marked the 20th anniversary for *Blair Witch*, which just made the whole collaboration so much sweeter."

Putting players in the same Black Hills Forest featured in the first movie, Bloober Team's *Blair Witch* tells an entirely new story of a former police officer who, with his trusty dog Bullet,





goes off in search of a missing child. Setting this first-person horror experience in 1996 added further authenticity to the series' lore, smartly limiting the player's toolset to devices only available at the time, such as a video camcorder and two-way radio. "Our game takes the well-known setting and introduces original characters into it, characters not typically associated with the *Blair Witch* universe," Wilczek says. "This being a Bloober Team game, it definitely leans more towards the psychological horror genre than the movies have done."

Those who've played the studio's previous games, such as *Layers of Fear* and *Observer*,

▲ *Blair Witch* only features period-accurate tech from 1996. This includes Nokia phones that come complete with an in-game version of *Snake*.

► WayForward Technologies implemented what's known as a '2D HD' art style to create *Batman: The Brave and the Bold*'s authentic cartoon look.

▼ Bloober Team used their prowess in first-person horror games to create a new chapter set within the *Blair Witch* universe.



will recognise its approach to horror in *Blair Witch*. Lionsgate had played those, too, and it was this mutual understanding of each party's talents that laid the foundation for their working relationship. "They've been extremely supportive throughout the development process, helping us make an experience that feels like *Blair Witch* and still plays like a Bloober game," says Wilczek.

Ultimately, while there will always be licensed games being worked on by the industry's largest studios, it's heartening to know that the talents and capabilities of indies have matured so much in recent years that iconic brands like DC, Disney, and others are finally taking proper notice. Now, having spoken to the developers lucky enough to find themselves in such a freeing setup, it's clear that the advantages are manifold: licence-holders get valuable exposure from having their properties attached to a video game, and thanks to the passion and agility of smaller studios, the games beneath those properties are now more daring, imaginatively crafted, and individual than ever before. 🗿

