



GROWTH SPURT

THE RISE OF DIGIC PICTURES

After 15 years of producing the biggest game trailers and cinematics, Digic Pictures reveals how it became one of the leaders in the industry

We're somewhat surprised to find ourselves in a paradise. Overlook the overbearing logos of some of the biggest names in the tech industry, and you'd be forgiven for not believing that Graphisoft Park is a perfectly tuned oasis nestled only a short bus ride from the city life of Budapest's downtown.

The purpose-built technological centre of the Hungarian capital is a considerable shift from tall stuccoed buildings and ornate bridges, and its serenity amid lush green grass, intricate statues and the sound of trickling water certainly gives the location an eerie dissonance of the city it's a part of. Many such technological centres claim to be the 'European Silicon Valley', but with names like Microsoft, Canon and SAP claiming a portion of the cultivated land here with their gleaming glass buildings, Graphisoft Park certainly has a strong stake for the title. Hidden away at the end of a footpath that bypasses a

small pond practically covered with lily pads is Digic Pictures, and while there was a time that the 3D studio would have looked out of place in such an environment, these days it's easily as significant as its neighbours.

The company was set up in 2002 by founder and current CEO Alex S Rabb, initially comprising just a small team of passionate Hungarian artists keen on making strides in the 3D movie space. Its heritage was in videogames, however, and so it made sense that it began there. "I joined in 2004," says Tamás Varga, the lead of the character division at Digic Pictures, which makes him a solid candidate to explain the company's rise to the top. "I was one of the modellers." Varga explains that the company had three modellers from a total team of 15 or

so, and that this gave the studio a personal vibe. "Sometimes I do miss the days when it was just 15 of us. Basically, everyone was the division by themselves: 'I am the modeller, you're the set-up guy, you're the animator', and so on."

The first project was a series of CG clips that would be used in-game for a medieval strategy game created by a Hungarian developer, of which the early founders of Digic had an association with. It was the intro cinematic that would stand out the most, however: a strong *Lord Of The Rings* tone that matched the particular beats of *The Two Towers'* Battle of Helm's Deep: ferocity, glory, despair. While the inspiration was hard to ignore - *The Two Towers* was released in 2002, after all - it was nonetheless an impressive movie, so much so, in fact, that it even went on to be screened during Siggraph's 2003 Electronic Theatre - the first ever Hungarian project to receive this honour.



Digic's mocap studio is on hand to help with any recordings, but is also hired out to others in the area



Games Workshop became involved after that, where the growing team produced the initial teaser and the opening intro, and once more its production gained global acknowledgment at Siggraph. "The game was an over-the-top strategy, so the characters were very small," recalls Varga. "It's based on a tabletop game where you have these small figures that have everything completely unrealistically exaggerated. What happened was that Games Workshop - it wasn't even the publisher or the developer of the game - sent us dozens of boxes of these little toys and lots of albums, and a huge pile of books and images, and they said, 'Do something good'. So we did our own story, our own concept work; it was absolute, complete, creative freedom. I do hear that a lot of people still think that that is our best work so far."

It must have made an impression, because things grew from there, with a considerable

“We did our own story, our own concept work; it was absolute, complete, creative freedom”

Tamás Varga,
Character division lead

number of more projects coming in. It wasn't until around 2009 where Digic Pictures really began to make a name for itself, however, producing its first real trailer for a product rather than an in-game cinematic. This was for *Darksiders*, an explosive cinematic that featured a range of mythically based creatures, scaling tension and an important focus on the detail of the main character. It showed what Digic could do, and ultimately led to much more of this sort of work - and more staff members to help deal with the work load.

"When I started, for two or three years after I was the only lighting artist," says Balázs Horváth, who is now the lead of the lighting and compositing unit, "After that, the company started to grow, and we started hiring artists. The lighting and compositing team now has 15 members, but we have to work on eight projects at the same time, so it's very difficult to manage

A THEORY OF EVOLUTION

How has the growth of Digid changed for its employees?

TAMÁS VARGA

"I have accepted long ago that things have changed, and will be changing. It is completely clear to me that if we want to move beyond the kind of projects that we can do as a small team then we have to expand. If we want to do something more than a one-minute trailer with five characters, if we want to do something like an animated feature, we have to grow for that. Things will have to change as the company grows, and so I have accepted it. As I said, sometimes I miss the old days, sometimes I don't."

GÁBOR LENDVAI

"When I came here there was about 40 people, so the company was mostly started by these guys. I really like that scale, because in that scale you can know everybody. I think that it's a really good size for a company and since then, as it grows, all of these guys became higher roles in their departments, which means that in our department - the animation department - there is, again, about 30 people. So it is the same size in the animation department as when I started. Again, I can feel that it is a good number, because we can know each other and we can have friendships with all of the guys in the animation department, and still have those friendships around in the other departments. I think growing together in a company like this it really makes you connected to other departments."

BALÁZS HORVÁTH

"I have only ever worked in one company before Digid, so I don't have too much of an idea of how it is to work somewhere else, but what I like about here at Digid is that inside the lighting team I have quite a lot of good friends, so the mood of the team is quite good, and sometimes we go on holiday together for a few days. The working environment [here is] perfect, maybe the projects could be less, but as I said, the creative freedom of what we can do or what we are responsible for is quite positive for me."

Digid is as at home with the fantastical as it is more realistic creations in its portfolio



Its scale is also just as adaptive, and capable of handling both personal pieces and large-scale scenes

the project." As you might expect, many of the division leads have been at the company for quite some time. The lead of the animation division, Gábor Lendvai, started at Digid roughly six years ago, where there were 'only' 40 people at the company. "Now there are about 270 people," he says. "You can talk and make friends with all of the guys in the company," he adds.

Growth was a natural part of the company, but as it became able to tackle more complex, demanding and significant projects, Digid had to evolve with the changing dynamic of the industry. With the cost of developing games booming exponentially - not to mention the carefully planned marketing campaigns to run alongside them - it has come to such a point that few developers are willing, interested or even able to produce their own trailers, in-game cinematics and in some cases even all of its own cut-scenes in-house. That's where Digid has

stepped in, producing trailers for some of the biggest game franchises around: *Assassin's Creed*, *Halo*, *The Witcher* and *Final Fantasy*, to name just a few.

As Digid has grown into the 270-person studio it is today, it has produced some of the games industry's most appreciated and well-known trailers. Many of them have won significant awards, have been seen the world over by devoted fans, and a good number have taken spots on GameTrailers.com's Top 100 Greatest Trailers of All Time list - with its Venetian carnival-themed *Assassin's Creed II* announcing trailer at number three.

"We have - especially when you look at how it started with 15 people in basically one room - become one of the better-known studios,



Over the years it's worked with some of the biggest names in the games industry, from EA, Microsoft and Ubisoft



Digic has been working on *Assassin's Creed* for years, and its work evolves with the changing eras of the historic game series



particularly within the games space," says Varga. "So if someone wants to work for one of these big franchises, not on the actual game, but these trailers, cutscenes or short films, then Digic is one of the places you go to."

The advantages of Digic should be clear to anyone looking to make a name in the 3D art scene. Not only will they get access to the biggest and best franchises in the industry, they'll make a home for themselves in one of Europe's more exciting metropolitan locales. While its central European location makes Budapest a tantalising spot for any would-be newcomers, the lower production costs are an obvious boon; a reason the city is home to so many film production studios, too. But it was only recently that the company started looking outside Hungary's borders for talent.

"We were basically running out of people in the work market in Hungary," says Varga, "the

country is not so big, it was getting harder and harder to find people within the country."

The growth of the company has expanded further too, with its photoscan and motion-capture studios now integral parts of the company's capabilities in response to the demands of the 3D production industry, though the two operate separately as Digic Services.

"The photoscan facility," Varga adds as an example, "Regularly make visits to Korda Studio, which is a big movie studio [in Budapest]. They have actually worked on stuff like *Blade Runner 2049* and the National Geographic *Mars* series. They were scanning a lot of the items here at the facility, so they are actually now part of these big productions." These are all part of its tools, and a clear sign of the kind of growth that Digic has made over the last 15 years.

But there is one drawback to Digic's success. As reputed as its work may be, only those that

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Balázs Horváth,

Lighting and composition unit lead



Many of its staff praise Digic's work environment, where it feels as much like playing with friends than working



Digic even helped Microsoft with the production of key cinematics for Halo 4



pay close attention will ever know of their input. These trailers and cinematics are often pieces of marketing from developers who are equally known for their digital artistic merit, and in many cases they're not keen on advertising that such work has been outsourced. It's a challenge that Digic must face, because though it wins awards for its creations, it is often in the shadow of the franchises that it works with.

"There are restrictions, and sometimes they get frustrating," admits Varga, "But sometimes they get funny. That's the nature of this work." But for Lendvai, it's as much about finding creative control within those restraints. "It's always different from project to project, from client to client," he explains. "Sometimes the client has strict ideas already and drives the project that way, but for us animators the freedom could be – and it

“There are changes that make a bigger difference than what could be solved by motion capture”

Gabor Lendvai,
Animation division lead

happens in every project – that there are changes that make a bigger difference than what could be solved by the mocap in that part of the capture or the movie.”

And then there are those rare times that Digic's work actually has an impact on the final released game, even if there's rarely ever any credit when this happens.

"This is something that has been going through a slow but certain evolution through the last decade or so," explains Varga. "Back at the start, it was basically, 'Here's the concept art', and we start developing our own version, and of course we had to get feedback from the client to make different changes. Now, the only time we really have to do concept work on a lot of these projects is when we have to do something that's not in the game. One of the reasons to do CG in either a trailer or cut-scenes is because you don't have the ability to do that, you don't have



Darksiders gave Digic an opportunity to prove itself as a creator of trailers

TOOLS OF THE TRADES

Digic Pictures gives us a lowdown of the software and plugins used in-house

MODELLING

It might not surprise you to learn that everything the modellers create ends up in Maya, but admittedly the artists do have complete freedom to create in whatever software they want, and with whichever plugins they desire. "We have a very long history with ZBrush as well," says Tamás Varga, "And so they do have to use ZBrush, because that's where we have a pipeline." There is a mix of additional tools, however. The likes of Headus UV and Unfold3D are the two key choices for artists, while it's Body Paint for 3D texture painting with some Mari use for the higher-definition models.

ANIMATION

Again, the animation department also requires everything to end up in Maya to help with the pipeline flow and in fact most of the company's tools as a whole is built to work with Maya. Gábor Lendvai doesn't believe there's anything that Digic uses for animation that isn't standard across the industry. When it comes to plugins, however, many of these are created in-house by programmers. "Most of the plugins that we found useable since I've been here were our own," say Lendvai, "so there are no outside plugins that we force our animators to use, most of our animators have used [them already] for years before they came." He does add that those that aren't created by Digic are mostly basic additions that most animators will be using, such as Tween Machine or Studio Library.

LIGHTING

"We are using three different programs," says Balázs Horváth. The primary one is Maya, where the lighting process is developed. When it comes to rendering, Digic equips Maya with Arnold. "Well, actually we are using an in-house developed version of Arnold," adds Horváth, "So we are not using base Arnold shaders." Digic has its own dev team for creating plugins and adapting tools to fit specific requirements. Lastly, there's compositing software Nuke, which includes a DOF add-on to improve the base Nuke option.



Digic's trailer for Assassin's Creed II is one of the more known projects in the portfolio

time to do that or it just takes place in another time or another setting and that's why they don't have everything for it. Although sometimes they are not yet ready with the game asset, if the trailer is very early. But it does happen that we send back assets for the client to use."

There's a clear sense from the ever-expanding studio that this isn't such a problem, however. It pays the bills, after all, and while the location, facilities and opportunities will continue to grow, it's all a part of Digic's real goal.

"There is still a desire to have our own thing made," says Varga, "Something of our own, possibly even something as big as a computer animated feature. Building up the technology, building up the team, gathering the experience." The more that Digic grows, the more likely it is that it will one day take charge of its destiny and not rely on the licences of other companies, and maybe even outgrow Hungary's Silicon Valley

location. There's even a dream to move into postproduction, perhaps working alongside the likes of Budapest's booming film industry.

"Digic has a plan in the future to not only be working on the game cinematics, but to be involved in VFX," Horváth tells us, "but it would be an interesting or a good experience for us to use our knowledge in VFX shots. I would like that challenge." With such ambition guiding it, this is a company that isn't likely to be restrained by the bounds of a single industry. While it'll very much relish in its central European location for the length of its existence, Digic Pictures won't forever remain a name that only those in the industry recognise, of that you can be sure.