

Virtual Heroes Is Getting More Serious About Games

Posted: Aug 27, 2007

Virtual Heroes, a local start-up founded in 2004 that focuses on the burgeoning "serious games" market, has lured Japanese videogame veteran Takayoshi Sato, the creator of the Silent Hill games, to North Carolina.

The company has put him to work on a new game project for the Department of Homeland Security. Takayoshi serves as the director of visual design for this project, and he'll also work closely with members of the team of 34 on other serious games projects.

"I've been making games for the past 11 years," said Sato. "When I first started, creating games was a high-profit industry where teams of two to three people could make an entire game. We had the freedom to create games based on our preferences and there was excitement with these creations."

Takayoshi said the PlayStation era of gaming provided a fun backdrop to develop games in Japan. But a lot has changed as new consoles like PlayStation 2 and now PlayStation 3 have entered the business.

"The games industry has evolved into the creation of high fidelity games that can cost upwards of \$20 million and have large teams of people making them," said Sato. "The Japanese markets still try to keep teams smaller to keep the creativity level up, but American game development tends to be more expensive and more factory style with bigger budgets. Studios are very compartmentalized. Many of the games are sequels or the same thing over and over again. A lot of games today are focusing on shooting. When we did Silent Hill, that game was very much psychological."

It was this evolution of games from a creative outlet to a corporate business structure that led to Sato leaving Los Angeles, where he had been working with Electronic Arts on a new game project for two months, and join Virtual Heroes.

"Commercial gaming is all about making things as cool as possible," he said. "Things don't have to be realistic. Spaceships aren't realistic. With Serious Games, we're designing a city that players step into that feels real. We're not dealing with laser guns."

Virtual Heroes is using the latest technology from local game maker Epic Games' Unreal Engine 3 to make training fun. Sato said it's important to have high quality simulations with "sexy visuals" to make training both comprehensive and fun for people today.

Virtual Heroes is working on a number of projects in the medical field with companies like Duke University Medical Center, George Washington University Medical Center, National Institute of Health, Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, Durham Veteran's Administration Hospital, and nContact Surgical. The company also continues to help out on the America's Army game, which it's been working on since the company was originally founded in Cary.

Sato said that training is the company's mission. He said he's working with Virtual Heroes on multiplayer training experiences in multiple fields that allow participants to practice better communication.

"People need to communicate with other people using the computer," said Sato. "We're in the infancy now of

what can be done in this field. There's a lot of variation. It's not a set format. Things will evolve into a simulation/communications tool over time."

And after 11 years of making commercial games, Sato is excited about games again. The only difference is that the games he's making now will actually have a more meaningful impact than simply entertaining the masses. His work now will help save lives and has the potential to actually change the world in a positive way.

Copyright 2007 by WRAL.com. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten or redistributed.