Q&A: PSYCHIC SOFTWARE & DARKWIND: WAR ON WHEELS

For a game that is only 80MB in size and free to play (although subscribers get access to the more detailed functionality), Darkwind proves you can't judge a game only by its screenshots. It was through fortuitous happenstance that we stumbled across Darkwind and its vibrant, enthusiastic community that, going against practically everything that is considered the norm these days when it comes to online communities, actually has the time and patience to welcome new players and show them the ropes. The screenshots of the game may not look like much, but that is what makes this game such a diamond in the rough - what you don't see.

After a few grueling hours of explosive repercussions combined with pinpoint tactical turn-based vehicular mayhem on the deathtrack, we caught up with Sam Redfern, the main man behind Psychic Software and Darkwind, to ask him a few questions.

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Orders Phase
Move Sent

Laser fired from Annette Jackman's vehicle
'Grease Monkey' Efrain Wright(Fish Heads): last turn here toe
Benito Ratzlaff(Clarinbridge Crushers): the new viper skins are nice aren't they?
Vehicle Messages Disabled

Lobby   Event   Team

AnimalFarm
Clarinbridge C
Toecutters
Gearjammers
Fish Heads
Death By Tire

25% DISCOUNT ON SUBSCRIPTIONS FOR NAG READERS!

Sam gracefully provided NAG with its very own discount for those interested in checking out Darkwind. If you enter 'NAG2007' as the promotion code while signing up, you'll receive a 25% discount on your subscription. The offer is valid until the end of September 2007.

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First off, the obligatory introduction question: who are you, and how did you get to where you are now?
Psychic Software is an indie games company in the west of Ireland, and has been making games since 1994. I actually set it up as a platform for all of my software development work, but games were always the main driving force. In fact, game making has always been my passion – from when I was only about 6 years old I was making crazy boardgames with complex rules, and dice, and little paper counters. From that point it was a natural step to start making computer games, which I started when I was 11, on an Apple II and then a BBC Micro. I had a 2D Elite-like game ('Space Trader') published in Personal Computer World Magazine in 1984, at the age of 13. Most of the games I wrote during the 1980s were passed around and played by friends and friend-of-friends – they were all detailed simulations or wargames of one sort or another, and they kept people entertained for weeks. A little more recently, 'Critical Hit' (1995) was one of our most successful projects, and was the game for which Psychic Software was actually set up. This was written for the Amiga and distributed on the fledgling Internet – at the time mostly FTP sites and the like.

Tell us a bit more about *Darkwind*, what it is and what your hopes for the game are?
Darkwind: War on Wheels is a persistent, 3D massively multiplayer wargame set in the near future, which combines the depth of detail inherent in turn-based games, with long-term strategic elements that keep the challenge going for months/years. The game is staged on a sparsely populated continent, one of the few surviving areas of civilisation following the 'solar apocalypse' triggered by a temporary failure of the earth's protective magnetosphere. The focus of the game is on vehicular combat - cars with guns - both in the wilderness and in man-made arenas and racing circuits. As well as competitive leagues and ladders, the game also has a detailed trade model, a dynamic economy and a host of AI gangs of pirates, traders and racers who compete alongside the human players.

The strategic elements of the game are controlled via a web browser, while the individual races and combats are conducted using a game client, which is available for Windows and Mac OSX (with Linux coming soon).

Darkwind is fostering an enthusiastic community of players. Our hope is that the game grows, but that it does so without losing its fantastic social side. We don't expect to be the next World of Warcraft (nor would we want to be) but we do have an extremely scalable model for both technology and gameplay. It is critical that the game balance remains as the player base grows, and we have spent a lot of time designing the game's economy and long-term strategy to ensure this.

Darkwind is very much a dark horse MMO that seems to have no problems running its own race, doing its own thing. It fills a very untapped niche with its theme and actual game mechanics. What inspired the development of *Darkwind*, in terms of undertaking such a massive project (since MMOs are hardly the easiest game type to develop)?
It is certainly a big commitment, and perhaps goes against the accepted wisdom of what is possible for a small development company to produce. But *Darkwind* goes against many of the norms of current MMOs, so we don't have a problem with that. I would describe *Darkwind* as an MMO Wargame or an MMO Boardgame, or even an MMO Sports game - rather than an MMORPG: what keeps it playable for an

extended period is not the huge amount of custom content, but the fact that you're operating in a complex and challenging simulated world. It's in the tradition of *Elite*, and perhaps more strikingly *Civilization*, which succeeded in being an epic and extremely replayable game on the strength of its simulation and not on its amount of graphical content.

Darkwind provides a complex economy, for example, based on systems dynamic simulation, which is directly impacted by resource creation, geography, on-the-road piracy and supply and demand. This is possible because we run many aspects of the game to a real-world time scale. It takes hours to travel between towns; it takes hours to upgrade your cars; it takes days or even weeks to heal injured characters, and the economy itself tends to run to long-term cycles as the simulated successes and failures of the world's NPC traders and pirates are calculated. Players need to think and plan, and the consequences of their decisions impact them for weeks into the future.

Another major part to the game is the racing, arena combat and deathracing leagues. This was designed as an important part since it provides a continuing challenge and a 'safe' platform for PvP. Sports games don't need huge amounts of custom content, because the enjoyment is in mastering the simulation and improving your skills, not in exploring and taking in the new eye candy.

As an indie, you pick your battles. We don't have the resources to make a massively detailed graphical world or to continually produce new content and quests for our players. But we don't need to, because the game remains challenging on its own merits.

One of the biggest problems with MMOs is the "what do I do now?" syndrome, when you realise that your actions are ultimately meaningless to the game world and there isn't much to do other than grind up your skills. The design of Darkwind is in many ways a direct attempt to avoid this situation.

Automotive combat set in a seemingly post-apocalyptic theme is a very under-represented motif in gaming these days, despite the strong inspirational material put forth by the *Mad Max* movies and the original *Car Wars* board-game from the early 1980s. How much of *Darkwind* was inspired by these sources or other sources?
We would certainly see both *Car Wars* and *Mad Max* as major inspirations. Many of our most enthusiastic players are actually ex-*Car Wars* fanatics. Another source would be Judge Dredd's 'Cursed Earth' which portrays a very dark but also a humorous picture of a post-apocalyptic future, with colourful mutants with comical personalities abound.

At a first glance, it's surprising that fantasy MMOs continue to dominate to such a great extent. One reason of course is the unwillingness of big business to take the risk of treading new ground. But there's other reasons too: for example the physics underlying a car game are very CPU intensive, which makes it very hard to do well in an MMO environment, as well as very greedy on server CPU cycles. These are good technical and economic reasons for rehashing fantasy MMOs.

But perhaps it's more fundamental that that. Popular artforms tend to follow a well-defined cycle. They go through a pulp period where everything

is predictable and utterly derivative – the industry producing them is unwilling or unable to think outside the box. In literature, we had pulp fiction and gothic novels of the late 19th Century – but eventually modern literature emerged from them. In cinema, we had the 'B' movies and pulp horrors of the 1950s – again, what followed this was an industry that was much more able to innovate. In pop music, the early bands – even the rock 'n roll greats of the 1950s – primarily published cover versions in very formulaic styles. I would argue (or hope) that computer games are currently in their pulp period, and that better things are to come!

The unique turn-based racing lets players pull off rather impressive manoeuvres around the track. Why did you decide to go turn-based, aside from the obvious benefits in terms of lag tolerance?
The main reason for making the game turn-based was because such a tactically detailed game could simply not be played in real-time. You need to be able to control multiple vehicles, each with multiple characters and guns in. You also need to manage other factors such as character psychology and stress levels. We could have made an RTS-style game of course, but (and it may be just a personal opinion) the real-time nature of these tends to detract from the real strategy and certainly causes a loss of fine control over your individual combat units. Many RTS games test little more than who has the best and fastest mouse control.

There are also a number of other benefits to the game being turn-based.

Turn based racing may sound strange (unless you're aware of the long history of car racing board games, which goes back at least to the 1960s) – but it really does work. We provide each car with a 'ghost', which shows its predicted position after one move; the ghost updates as you turn the wheel and decide on your move, and the accuracy of the ghost's prediction is related to the driving skill of the character you're playing. The ghost allows players to control their car far better than they could in real-time – after all, few of us are actually professional racing drivers – and means that (unlike real-time racing games) you tend to have a genuine tactical battle rather than just seeing who is first to make some dumb mistake. *Darkwind* is the only turn-based car game that we know of with accurate physics.

A turn-based game tends to be much more sociable – like a boardgame – and this was our precise intention. You have time to chat, smack-talk and even just watch each other's moves as well as your own. The game is, as you state, naturally also very lag tolerant (and bandwidth friendly) – but also the server calls pre-emptive timeouts for you if your connection drops, so you can often recover fully from what would in most games be catastrophic.

The turn-based nature of the game also gives resource usage and performance benefits. The load on our game servers is much less, since they're only simulating one second of movement every 20 or 30 real-world seconds. It also means that the computers owned by the game players are freed from doing any physics simulation whatsoever – something that is impossible in a real-time car game where client-side prediction is required to fill in the gaps in the network packets – and therefore we can support quite modest hardware.

Once someone has signed up for *Darkwind*, they receive emails from in-game characters (that provide hints and advice) over the space of a few weeks. This is quite a unique and very personal feature that really adds a layer of charm to the game. What inspired the idea?
The main thinking behind this is that we're aware that you need to be creative in your method of getting information to people nowadays. If you feed them nuggets of useful information over a period of time, and in a way that takes no effort on their part, you're much more likely to get them to read it. It's also a

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good way of filling out the background story and roleplaying atmosphere of the game. Furthermore, we're attempting to create a blurring of the boundaries between the real world and the game world – this is something that you really can do in a game that's tied to a real-world time scale. The fact that you are forced to wait for your vehicles to get fixed up before setting off on that big trade convoy mission means that you consider and agonise over your decisions while going about your everyday life – sitting in traffic or whatever becomes much less boring. The emails from in-game characters are part of that.

How has the community support for *Darkwind* been, have you seen many subscribers and people just checking the game out?
Most visitors to the game fall into one of two types: firstly, those that either don't 'get it', or perhaps don't have the patience to see beyond the lack of AAA graphics; and secondly, those that get hooked

on the complexity, challenge and attention to detail. It's probably the simple difference between being a wargamer and being an FPS player: these types of games are simply very different and are basically a matter of taste. The community is really good though – partially due to the relaxed nature of a turn-based game, and partially because of the type of person that is attracted to this type of game. You need some patience to learn the details in order to be good enough to play competitively, and this tends to mean our players are patient and mature.

What are your plans for *Darkwind* over the next few years, will there perhaps be a *Darkwind 2* or other MMO project in the future?
We have new features planned for the next 18 months or more – for example player-owned factories and camps, which will push more of the economy away from an abstract simulation and towards direct player control, as well as being the basis for long-term factions and
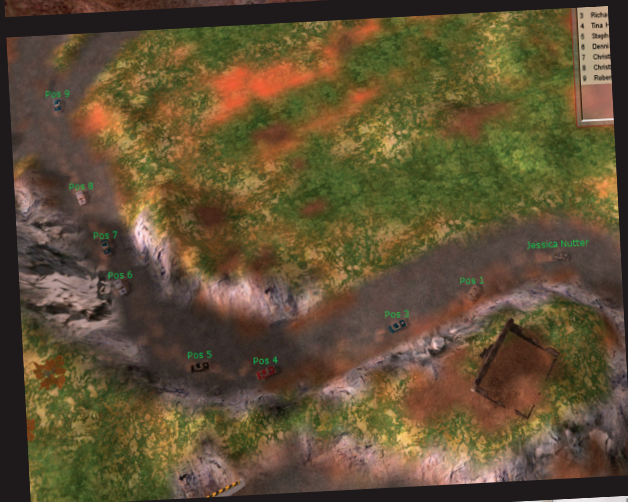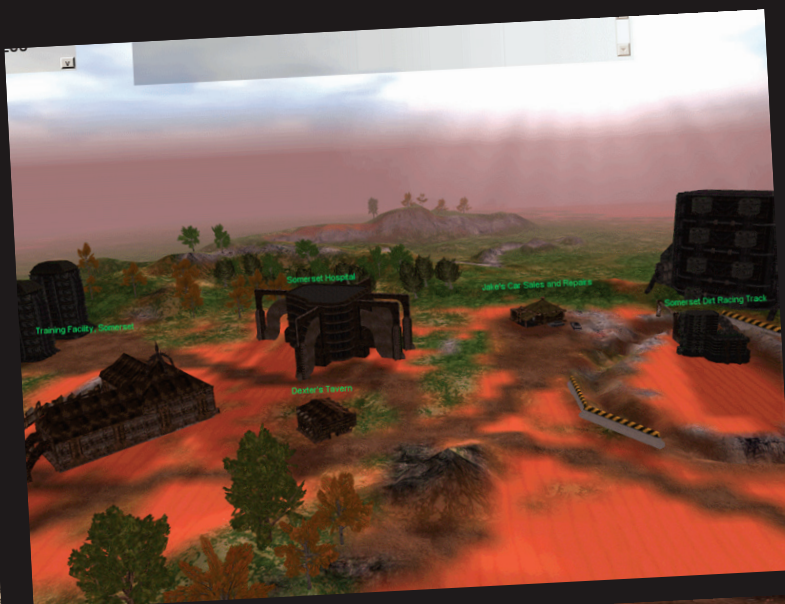
SAM REDFERN

In addition to being a games programmer and head-honcho behind Psychic Software, Sam Redfern also lectures programming and graphics at the National University of Ireland in Galway. His academic research is in the area of "Collaborative Virtual Environments", which is essentially the use of game technologies to support the work of distributed teams.

warfare. We're also going to have characters on foot within the next 3 months or so. In technical terms, the event-based (or skirmish-based) model of *Darkwind* is inherently very scalable so we're ready to plug in new servers, as they are required. Beyond 18 months, we have several ideas under consideration, but no firm decisions have yet been made on these.

What would you consider the most important lessons you've learned while developing *Darkwind*?
We have learned that the incremental adding of new features while taking strong community input is a great way to develop a game like this. There is so much gaming experience and so many great ideas in the community that it would be silly to ignore it and think that we knew it all. For example, our original model for the racing and combat leagues was very different to how it is now – and it didn't work well in terms of playability. It's not an easy thing to do, but we basically unravelled several months of work and rebuilt the

entire league system late last year, following extensive discussions with our alpha-test players. In this particular case, we had little choice but to design the original league mechanics ourselves, since *Darkwind* didn't exist as a game without them. There's no way we would consider developing any major feature in future without substantial community input.

Do you find it hard to gain exposure for *Darkwind* in this current booming MMO market that seems to be heading for a massive explosion of titles over the next few years?
Yes. Unfortunately, many game players today don't have much patience and aren't willing to even try a game if the graphics aren't cutting edge: this seems to be especially true in the MMO market. But we are seeing a good growth of the game as a niche offering. *Darkwind* tends to be played by a different type of person to one that would play traditional MMOs. We're exploring alternative directions for getting exposure,

for example the wargaming sector. For the moment though, we're content to grow organically. It certainly keeps things simpler in terms of technology and also game dynamics, and it works for us since our costs are low.

Where does the name Psychic Software stem from?
You were probably hoping for some funny anecdote here! Actually, I just liked the sound of it. It is an alliteration with a silent P. A wordplay, perhaps. Luckily our bank is very understanding though, since the majority of cheques we receive have the company name mis-spelt!

Thank you so much for taking the time to answer these questions, and best of luck with *Darkwind* and future projects!
Thanks yourself! If I had known who you were on that figure-8 racetrack I might have kept my finger off the trigger of the machine gun ;-) **NAG**