y Karen Kaye

Brett Durrett is the President and CEO of Halestorm, Inc. It was my pleasure to interview him and to find out some interesting tidbits not only about Allied General, but the company as well.

Brett has been in the computer/video entertainment industry for about eight years. Like most newbies, he started out doing contract programming, usually for
small parts of games rather than entire products. In the years to follow,
he cut his teeth by programming on a variety of platforms, including the Macintosh, Super Nintendo, Sega Genesis, Atari ST and Amiga.

In 1992, he joined what was to become Halestorm, Inc. The company was in its infancy, so he had the opportunity to gain a broad experience base. At various times, he performed the functions of project manager/programmer/jr. artist/janitor. As the organization grew, it became obvious that Brett was not very productive at any one of his original jobs, so he was promptly kicked up into the ranks of management. In 1994, sensing that he had probably peaked in both his human resources and project development skills, he was further removed from the people that actually do the work, and assumed his current duties as CEO.

IMG: Would you mind giving our readers a brief background on your company?

Durrett: Halestorm was founded in 1992 with little more than the intent to make software. We started making games, educational software, applications, licensing sound drivers and providing sound content for other companies. While the diversity always made things interesting, it did not allow us to grow strong in any particular area. In late 1994 and early 1995 the company went through some major restructuring. We decided to focus on creating great entertainment software. The focus has really helped - we're looking at releasing a few "A" products this year. So far, the press has been wonderful. Other than that, we're basically just a bunch of people making software under quite possibly the tallest palm trees in Berkeley.

IMG: What do you consider the major milestones or successes of the company?

Durrett: It's difficult to say - we've had a lot of success on very different levels. We've also met with a lot of hurdles trying to reach that success. Making the transition into entertainment software was a huge milestone for the company. We're still waiting to see if it was a success. I would consider the products we are releasing this year to be a major success for the company. Perhaps the biggest success is our current development team. It takes a tremendous amount of hard work and compromise to make a project as big and important as Allied General work with so many personalities involved. I can honestly say I have never had the privilege of working with a more dedicated group of people.

IMG: If you could single out one or two key areas that contributed to your success so far, what would they be?

Durrett: People and persistence. Halestorm has great people with great ideas. I believe that when people have a genuine sense of ownership of their work, they will create the best work they can. That's the hardest part about being a developer, and not a publisher - we do not always get final say on any particular aspect of a product. As for persistence, that's just stubbornness when it comes to giving up - I think it's a must for any small company.

IMG: How do you plan to adjust your development strategy in the future?

Durrett: We're planning on keeping each person focused on only one project at a time. I think there is a tendency for small development companies to try to bring in as many streams of income as they possibly can - it's a survival instinct. Some people will be working on 2 or 3 projects at the same time. At one company, I talked to a producer that was working on 10 projects. Eventually one project or another will suffer from this strategy. This is more acceptable to a larger company that can absorb the loss, but it becomes a nightmare for the small developers. The downside of keeping each person focused on one project is that each project becomes more expensive and there is almost always a need to hire more people. If anybody out there is looking for a job, please don't hesitate to fax us a resume.

IMG: Panzer General (PG) was a major hit. Did you have an inkling that you had a winner on your hands?

Durrett: We agreed to do the sequel to Panzer General before it was released. I think everybody at SSI felt good about the game, but I don't think anybody knew it was going to be so wildly successful. Our initial interest was to present SSI a Mac game that looked like a Mac game. We felt they had a great potential in the Mac market, but were not getting the success in that market because the games were not very Mac savvy. The fact that Panzer did so well was a blessing for all of us. I just hope that Allied General is well received in the Mac market - I think it would go a long way towards encouraging future Mac development at SSI.

IMG: What were the key design decisions that made PG the success that it was?

Durrett: Panzer was designed and developed by SSI, not Halestorm. From our discussions, they approached the project with the goal of making it fun before making it accurate. Certain aspects of the game maintain a high level of accuracy, but others detach in the interest of game play. It really paid off for SSI. Allied General was approached in the same manner. We're all hoping it continues to pay off.

IMG: When will we see PG on the Mac? Or are you holding off until the release of PG II?

Durrett: If I did know something about Panzer General on the Mac, I would be under non-disclosure and would not be able to say anything.

IMG: Allied General (AG) seems a logical counterpart to PG. When did development on this title begin?

Durrett: Almost exactly one year ago, in November 1994. It has taken a lot to get the game done so quickly. At some points in development, we have had over 10 people working in parallel on this project. Pretty much everyone at our company has been involved with the project on some level. The schedule would have been impossible without the support of SSI - they are a great example of what a publisher can achieve by working closely with a developer.

IMG: What new features are you planning to include in AG that improve on its predecessor?

Durrett: Most obvious is the true windowing environment. This allows the player to take advantage of larger monitors with an increased play area and the ability to view all pertinent information at the same time. We've also made enhancements to a lot of the features, unlimited saves, robust e-mail, and items like that. I think the game is also enhanced with the original paintings created specifically for the scenarios.

IMG: The first thing that struck me about the preview copy of AG was the beautifully rendered vehicles. I could easily tell the difference between the various models of the Panzer IV. What made you decide to develop AG as a Mac product from the ground up?

Durrett: Actually, we developed it as a Mac and Windows product - but neither were done in the typical "porting" style. We have some cross-platform libraries that interface with the destination platform's native interface so that a Mac product looks like a Mac product and a Windows product looks like a Windows product.. Coming from a strong Mac background, we really tried to pay attention to the little things a Mac user would appreciate.

IMG: The units represented in the game are somewhat abstract. I get the feeling that in most cases a unit represents a combat division, artillery regiment or aircraft squadron. Is this a valid approximation? Yes, for the most part it is a valid approximation. However, each unit can be scaled in size depending upon the map scale. This is a good example from your earlier question regarding key design decisions - the accuracy was compromised in the interest of great game play.

Durrett: I enjoyed the campaign concept which tied several scenarios into a simulation of the fighting in a particular theater. The "core units" from one scenario are carried forward to the next. Don't you think that the player would be more likely to treat the units equally if the "core units" were identified during the scenario? Actually, the core units are identified during the scenario. This does create a tendency for some units to be sacrificed, but it works into the overall strategy.

IMG: Will AG support both 68040 and Power Macintosh computers?

Durrett: Allied General runs in native 68000 and Power PC code. Actually, it will also run on much lower-end machines - we were quite surprised to find in ran on a very old 68030 with only 5 Megabytes of RAM. In fact, that system we tested it on fell below the "minimum system" requirements on everything except the monitor.

IMG: Have you considered offering your games in an on-line format where armchair generals could easily locate and meet opponents?

Durrett: This is generally something that would be offered by the publisher and not the developer. However, I just found out today that the programming gnomes were frisky over the weekend an introduced a feature that will allow you to play Allied General over the internet. If there is enough testing, you will probably see it in the product when it releases in a couple of weeks.

IMG: What projects are under development at this time? Which title is likely to ship following AG?

Durrett: We have a few projects that we are looking at for 1996 and early 1997. We will be providing 2 titles to SSI, plus we have a title with another publisher. We will continue doing Mac and Windows work but we will also add the Sony Playstation to the list of platforms supported by Halestorm. While I can not mention a title, the game immediately following Allied General will be a similar game for the Macintosh. Also, as a company, we will have a surprise or two late in the middle of next year.

IMG: Any final comments for our readers and the prospective buyers of your product?

Durrett: We've spent the last couple of weeks just polishing the product - something that SSI agreed would be well worth the time. It's great to work with a publisher that knows how important it is to make sure that the product is just right. The extra work paid off - it really shows. I hope our audience enjoys the game and buys lots of copies for friends, relatives, neighbors and pets.

I would also like to thank your readers for the initial interest in Allied General, and that you for the opportunity to do this interview.

Brett Durrett lives in a small Victorian house in North Berkeley with his dog and a borrowed cat. He spends most of his free time, of which he has an abundance of now that he is not coding, mowing yards and stripping wallpaper. His most recent ambition is to form a company ice hockey team. Brett would be happy to be distracted from his domestic pursuits and can be reached at bdurrett@halestorm.com.