

MG Interview: **Psygnosis**

by Douglas Kiang

This month's IMG Interview was conducted with two of the principals at Psygnosis North America, Jerry Wolosenko, CEO, and Mark Tsai, Senior Developer /Programmer. Psygnosis' first Macintosh release, Lemmings, has won numerous awards including arcade-entertainment product of the year, and next month Psygnosis will release Oh No! More Lemmings!, a collection of 100 brand new Lemmings levels.

IMG: Just how successful has Lemmings for the Macintosh been compared with other platforms?

Jerry: Well, it's very difficult to gauge, but we're probably up to about 40,000 pieces on the Macintosh, which is a very good number. I think we're doing fine and what is interesting is that the numbers are increasing month-by-month, even in a slow period like June or July. I think that Lemmings is a very successful game because it has a lot of elements that work well in a gaming sense that were designed into the game from the start.

IMG: What is the age range for a game like Lemmings? How do you keep up with feedback from your users?

Jerry: What we have been able to get back from the warranty cards is that everybody is a customer. We get very young children who play Lemmings, to senior citizens. We get a lot of cards that say, "I've never played a video game in my life and I bought this for my grandson and now he and I play together." So we have a very broad audience.

IMG: I know you mentioned earlier that for a long time there really weren't any Macintosh games to speak of, and now the market is opening up more and more. Will Psygnosis continue to support the Mac as a platform in future game development?

Jerry: We'd like to support it. The Macintosh version of Lemmings was really driven from the United States. Our home office is in Liverpool, and a lot of the decisions are driven from there. The Macintosh platform is not nearly as strong a platform there as it is in America. So the Macintosh version of Lemmings was really one that we promoted very extensively; as a matter of fact, we have a group here in the United States that did the Macintosh version. So certainly the success of Lemmings has really opened everyone's eyes to the fact that there really is a market for Macintosh games in the United States.

IMG: What does your office here in Cambridge [Mass.] do?

Jerry: We handle all of the Psygnosis business in North America. We've also been doing some

development work, so we're doing some original products here as well. We sell all the Psygnosis products, primarily PC-based products, but we're just launching our cartridge products this month, so we'll have Sega Genesis and SNES [Super Nintendo] products soon. We're also releasing some Macintosh CD-based products, mostly of the informational type.

IMG: So will there be other Lemmings-type products?

Jerry: Right now we're working with Children's Television Workshop on a joint project to be released in the spring. It will be a game that is specifically designed for younger children. CTW is designing new levels that will teach different kinds of skills. It's still Lemmings, but a newly-designed Lemmings that is specially targeted for that age group.

They've done some market studies and one of the things they found, for example, was that kids wanted larger Lemmings. They also found that there should be immediate indications of the skill assigned to a particular Lemming, and that skill should remain intact. For example, if a Horizontal Basher finishes bashing, it should continue the bashing motion. So, we're trying to address those types of issues.

IMG: What sort of feedback on Lemmings have you gotten from the Macintosh community?

Jerry: Well, on some of the warranty cards we get back, we'll get people who really don't like the copy protection scheme . . . and they'll really flame us! I mean, they'll give the game a 9 or a 10, but they'll really slam us on the copy protection. But we do appreciate feedback. Based in part on what we found from the warranty cards, we made the copy protection a little easier on the Mac version.

IMG: Related to that, one of the comments that I kept hearing frequently was that on the original Lemmings you had to enter a certain code for each level. Some people got very upset and felt that if they've bought the game, they should be able to go to any level they wanted to. . . .

Mark: Well, yes and no. I mean, when you're playing King's Quest, you can't just zap right to the second to the last scene. One of the advantages about the level codes is that we can get you to any level just by giving you a code. It's much harder to navigate you to the second to last scene in King's Quest because then we'd have to tell you exactly what to do every step of the way.

IMG: But for the people who get Lemmings, for example, and get really stuck on a given level, there really is no way for them to skip it and go on to the next level.

Mark: Well, that's true, as the game stands by itself, they really can't do that. But, on level 23, I can guarantee that you're going to need to know something from Level 20 and 19. In any case, what they do is call up, and at that point we can give them the code directly or give them a hint on how to solve an "impossible" level.

IMG: Mark, do you want to say a little about what you do?

Mark: Basically, what I do here is support the development process. One of the major things is to make sure that some of the comments mentioned in the warranty cards are implemented in the next product. The Lemmings copy protection was fixed, for example, and we've added some special features to the Mac version like the "speed-up" key.

Jerry: Mark also was responsible for making sure that we implemented improvements from the PC version. For example, the speed-up key. The manual and box are very different from the PC version and were created specifically for the Macintosh. Also, the copy protection was made easier — not eliminated, but made easier.

IMG: Any tips on playing Lemmings?

Jerry: The secret to many of the levels lies in not seizing the obvious. For example. Bridge Builders are

used to span a gap of some kind, or to get up on something. That's the most obvious application of Bridge Builders. But in fact, they do other things. One of the things they do is delay other lemmings. So if you have extra Bridge Builders you can use them to delay lemmings so you don't have to use a Blocker and maybe lose him. So it's things like that. If you look at some of the skills that are involved, try not to look at the most obvious skills that are involved, but start looking around for other things that you can do.

IMG: Tell me a little bit about how the animation for Lemmings was done.

Jerry: The guy that does the animations is really very good. If someone said to you, I've got a real design problem. I've got an area that is about 8 x 8 [pixels] and I want you to design a character that will go into that area that will have a personality. What is important about a good animator is that you almost have to be an animated caricaturist. What you need to do is work with some really minimal shapes and yet convey a feeling. We feel he did a remarkable job at portraying the lemmings in all manner of situations: when lemmings fall their hair flies up, for example. It's all of those little details that you don't really pay attention to that stick in your mind, and contribute to the whole Lemmings feel. That's why I think it's successful.

Mark: In addition, there are over 3200 frames of lemmings animation in Lemmings 2.

IMG: Can you fill us in on some of the details in Lemmings 2? Will there be new skills added?

Jerry: In Lemmings 2: The Tribes there are 55 skills in total. Lemmings 2 is like the second generation of Lemmings. It's not like Oh No! More Lemmings, which is basically 100 additional Lemmings levels. With Lemmings 2, the story is that at the conclusion of Lemmings 1, the lemmings multiplied and separated into 12 distinct tribes and settled on different parts of the island. Each of the tribes developed its own personality. So that's what The Tribes is all about—you have the Classic Lemmings, you have Ninja lemmings, you have Circus lemmings, you have Medieval lemmings, and so on and so forth. You have to save at least one member from each Tribe in order to save the Lemmings. In addition, the levels are dependent on each other, so the number of Lemmings you save in the earlier levels becomes very important later on. So, in that sense it's more integrated — a more comprehensive game than the original. It's in the process of being ported over to the Mac right now.

IMG: And in the interim?

Jerry: We're also going to continue to develop additional Lemmings levels. For example, we're going to create a special Christmas-level Lemmings — a 32-level game that is full of Christmas scenes: Lemmings throwing snowballs, Lemmings traps that have to do with the winter season, holiday tunes, and that kind of thing. It'll be a good stocking stuffer.

IMG: Is it going to be a plug-in module for people who already have Lemmings, or will it be a stand-alone?

Jerry: No, it's going to be a complete game. We don't want to make it dependent on someone owning the game. We want anyone to be able to try it out.

IMG: Does Psygnosis have any more plans for releasing games in the entertainment/educational market?

Jerry: I think it's inevitable. Certainly, we're going to continue with the Lemmings products. And we will be doing more educational products. There are some CD companies that have some CD engines that look pretty good. We're going to be broadening our scope in the near future to incorporate the CD format. We've been working on CD-ROM development for three years. I mean, strictly from a business point of view, the gaming business is extremely seasonal. We sell 60% - 65% of our product in the third and fourth quarter. With cartridges, we sell all of it in the third and fourth quarter. So for us it's important to develop a product line that has a more even distribution. And we'd like to broaden our audience.

IMG: What is a typical day at Psygnosis like?

Mark: Actually, there is no typical day! But in general, I might do any of a number of things, from looking at documentation, to checking for bugs in new code, track down what's happening with other companies. Something is always going on. I usually find enough to keep me busy all day . . . all 26 hours of it! :-) It's tough to describe, really. But it's a lot of fun.

IMG: And when you get your inspirations for new Lemmings levels?

Mark: I have a computer setup at home, too, so I can always work there. There are a lot of outlets for that sort of thing. It's sometimes difficult to do creative work in the office, sometimes, because it gets extremely busy.

Jerry: A lot of my day consists of communication with the UK. We use faxes, we use a lot of e-mail between here and the UK, and we use the phone. I might do all sorts of things from code approvals, to things like packaging, and checking documentation. For example, for the last few days, the first hour and a half of both days was involved with looking at final copy for the back of the Sega Genesis boxes for our upcoming release. They had written copy that was appropriate for release in Europe, but some of the colloquialisms would not have been appropriate for the States. So, we were working with the writer on that. Also, right now we're working on a product release for the fall that is being worked on in the UK. So we needed to look at some code from London, so we were getting them to upload some of the code that they were looking at, and Mark was downloading it here. They talked to him at 10:00, by 11:30 we were looking at the code that we had talked about, and we could get right back to them and give them feedback.

IMG: Do you have any tips or advice for people who might be interested in getting into the gaming industry as a career?

Jerry: There really are no hard and fast rules. But be informed. Be informed about the business. Be observant. Know what people are looking for in terms of software, and know how people find and identify products. Know who the companies are, and which are the ones that are publishing. Our business is really more and more an entertainment business. Major movie studios, for example, are making significant investments in learning about computer interactive gaming. It only makes sense that an awareness of the direction that this is headed is very important.

IMG: I would like to thank both of you and the whole Psygnosis crew for granting Inside Mac Games this interview, and we look forward to the release of Oh No! More Lemmings! next month.