

y Jeff Eaton

In these days of PC-first software titles and thinning support for Apple, Changeling, Inc. is an uncommon inspiration. A Mac-Only game developer with a history of creative development, Changeling is staunchly pro-Macintosh. Recently, Changeling's Chris Larson took time out of frantic preparations for a new beta test cycle to talk to IMG about the company's history and future directions.

Changeling was originally formed in 1990 by a team of individuals to create Pax Imperia, one of the Mac's classic strategy games. "I joined Changeling about the time that it shipped in 1993" says Chris. "Pax really had a tremendous following; I think it was a real testament to the game that people have stayed loyal for so long. I remember getting one tech support call from a guy who'd been playing it with his friend for thirty-six hours /straight/... He was completely incoherent, and it took me about fifteen minutes to figure out what it was that he was trying to ask me. But it was one of my all time favorite tech calls, talking to this guy who hadn't slept for a day and a half playing."

Soon after Pax Imperia's introduction, Changeling entered a deal to publish High Risk Ventures's two games, Space Madness and Pegleg. Changeling was looking for opportunities to diversify their business, and the move clicked well with Larson's vision for the gaming company. "It's always been a pet concept of mine that there are a tremendous number of innovative concepts created by independent developers that never see the light of day," he says. "It's frustrating to see a lot of the things being developed by people and know that it's never going to be seen in stores. So we picked up that and Pegleg... and began focusing on stuff developed by individuals or small teams."

As time passed at Changeling Headquarters, it became apparent that Pax Imperia 2, the long-awaited upgrade to the game, was taking much longer to complete than first thought. In addition, the development work was taking more resources from Changeling's new publishing arm. "We had things coming in from sales of Pegleg and Space Madness, and that

was a healthy business. Pax wasn't generating any more resources, and at the beginning of 1995, we made the decision to split the company in half." Those responsible for Pax's development become Heliotrope Studios, and the others in the company incorporated as Changeling, Inc. to focus on publishing outside games.

One such game is Ares, a sci-fi strategy game created by programmer Nathan Lamont. In development for three years, Ares' approaching release has had Mac gamers — and Changeling — eager to see the completed product. "It's been really exciting as the demo came out and more beta testers started playing with Ares. I mean, we've thought it was a cool game, but we're biased," says Chris. "You think it's cool, but you've been playing it for a couple years and you start to wonder whether other people will like it, too. But the response from the testers has been just overwhelming — it's a lot of fun to watch them develop their own play styles."

Originally designed as a single-player game, Ares gained internet-savvy head to head play when Apple shipped its Games Sprockets toolkit. Over the weekend, Nathan had added NetSprockets support and AppleTalk/internet gameplay with minimal additional programming. The ease of that conversion, thanks to Apple's tools, is one of the reasons Changeling loves the Mac.

Will Changeling Publishing test the cross-platform waters? "I don't want to," Chris says. "If it comes to [moving to Windows], we would probably leave this business. The Mac market is good for another year no matter what happens, and that's not our concern... But we're bullish on Apple and the Mac. We just think if it came to that, we'd move on to something else."

"One of the things that I love is being able to tell anyone that I meet, confidently, that they can go buy a Macintosh... and know that they'll be able to use it." The Mac's appeal, Chris says, is that of a consumer electronics device, rather than a 'personal computer.' "Rather than targeting the Mac as a head to head competitor to Windows. I'd like to see Apple's Marketing run ads based around personal computers being difficult to use, difficult to configure. The Mac can be sold as something that you buy, take out of a box and plug in. It lets you do the things you would associate with a personal computer, but it's not like a computer... It's like a Macintosh."

What else is in Changeling's future? In addition to exploring the capabilities of new high-powered Macs, Larson would like to see more games that emphasize elegant, entertaining gameplay. "One of my big frustrations with the gaming market is that almost everything being developed requires a high end machine and a significant dose of testosterone." Larson feels that broad-appeal games with lower system requirements would tap in to currently ignored markets. "I enjoy Quake, Duke Nukem, and all those games quite a bit. But there are still a significant number of people out there who still have low end 040s, or even low-end PowerPCs. There's very little coming out that they can run."

In addition, the growing number of computer users opens up opportunities for players outside of traditional niches. "PCs are becoming more of a mainstream consumer device," he notes. "Your mom has one. And with that broadening, people outside the classic 'game' demographic want things to play. People enjoy games they can bring up for five minutes, or at least tell themselves they can bring up for five minutes. Tetris is a great example — PegLeg, and a lot of the Ambrosia games are, too. If you're at work on lunch hour, you can bring up a game and play a few levels, and feel like you've had a lot of fun, and you're done. I'd like to appeal to independent developers to bring that kind of stuff to fruition."

With the turmoil that the Mac market has endured over the past several months,

Changeling's commitment for the Mac and excitement for bringing new games to consumers is encouraging. "I'm more enthusiastic about the future of the Mac and Apple than I ever have been," says Larson. "I think that within the next two or three months we're going to see some massive changes for the better, and we're definitely going to have Macs a year or two from now."