

Westwood's Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow

The Westwood building is a hive of activity -- from the humming rendering farm calculating the latest 3D graphics to the beta testers hunched in front of their monitors, stereos blaring -- but the company's spacious home belies its humble beginnings. It all started 15 years ago as a crazy idea hatched by two struggling programmers, Brett Sperry and Louis Castle. Computers were the only thing they had in common. Sperry was a restless, fiery visionary, with brash dreams of making a name in the computer gaming industry. Castle fancied himself a cutting-edge artist who used computers to make digital paintings. A realist to the end, Castle figured he'd always eke out an existence with a day job programming, while at night he'd toil away at his labor of love, painting with computers. Sperry had bigger plans in mind. Both of them adept programmers and savvy designers, they were solo guns for hire in the newly burgeoning world of computer gaming -- a world of Apples and Commodores, floppy disks and BASIC.

It was hardly a romantic existence. The life of a freelance programmer was pretty ugly; underappreciated and chronically underpaid, they were mercenaries more out of need than desire. Sure, there was no end to the hype about cutting-edge technology and the brave new world of home computing. Problem was, if you were a freelancer, you lived from job to job, never quite sure where your next check would come from. Sperry was tired of the starving programmer lifestyle. He proposed to Castle that they start their own company, effectively banishing the middleman factor. Castle was all for it. Little did he know there were big things in store for the two-man company called Westwood Associates.

In 1985, they moved their computers -- a Macintosh, an Apple II and an Apple IIe -- into Castle's converted garage, hung up a business license, and began clicking away. The chemistry was perfect: Sperry would come up with high-flown ideas; Castle would help shape them into reality with his aesthetic sensibilities. They quickly programmed their way into gamers' hearts everywhere, developing a number of titles for Epyx, such as *The Temple of Apshai Trilogy*, *World Games* and *Super Cycle*. Other titles such as *DragonStrike* and *Eye of the Beholder* earned Westwood renown as an excellent producer of fantasy games.

Soon, the small company wasn't so small anymore, and in 1992, Westwood was bought by Virgin Interactive Entertainment. This gave Westwood the ability to publish its own titles, as well as access to Virgin's massive distribution network. The merger must have inspired the duo; it was in 1992 that Westwood launched two seminal titles that would change the face of gaming: *Kyrandia Book I*, a deep fantasy role-playing game; and *Dune II: The Building of a Dynasty*. *Dune II* was a strategy game that introduced a new element: real time. With the release of *Dune II*, the strategy genre was no longer a glorified chess game, in which you had to wait for your opponent to make a move -- now players could plot and scheme simultaneously, adding a new level of intensity and urgency to the strategy genre. The phrase "real-time strategy" became a household word almost overnight, and Westwood's innovation gave birth to a whole new genre in computer gaming.

Westwood's reputation grew even larger with the release of Disney's *Lion King* for the Super Nintendo and Sega Genesis. The million seller meant Westwood was now a force in the console arena. On the PC, Westwood released *Lands of Lore*, which ensured a standing as one of the top computer game developers.

In 1995, Westwood went on to carry the genre further with the groundbreaking *Command & Conquer* series, which pitted the noble Global Defense Initiative against the Brotherhood of

Nod, a neo-fascist terrorist group with daunting military might. The intense mission-based single player mode and multiplayer options made the game an instant hit, breaking sales records worldwide.

With their team growing, Sperry and Castle expanded upon their wildly popular real-time strategy genre with Red Alert, which saw the U.S. battling Soviet forces in an alternate history of time-travel and souped-up Tesla technology. Dominating the very genre it created, Westwood garnered a loyal fan base that continues to grow to this day.

But the company wanted to avoid pigeonholing themselves, and broke their own mold with a series of cutting-edge titles such as Blade Runner in 1997. Based in the setting of the acclaimed movie, Blade Runner featured a rich, non-linear story and graphic technology that set a landmark in computer games -- largely thanks to Westwood's new headquarters, which featured a fully equipped sound stage and a production room for live actors. In the meantime, Command & Conquer was still selling at a healthy clip, topping \$450 million in sales.

For the more classic-minded gamer, Westwood also released Monopoly, the first commercial board game designed for Internet play. To support Monopoly's Internet play, Westwood launched Westwood Online, which would come to be one of the world's largest Internet gaming sites. Today, there are more than a million members of Westwood Online.

In September 1998, Westwood Studios became part of the world's most successful entertainment software company, Electronic Arts, giving Westwood access to the distribution channels and marketing support that only a company of EA's size and stature can provide. This proved its value with the release of Command & Conquer Tiberian Sun in August of 1999. Thanks to EA's superior sales and distribution networks, Tiberian Sun was released simultaneously in more than 30 countries. More than 2 million copies of Tiberian Sun were ordered by retailers, and more than 1 million were purchased within one month, setting sales records all over the globe.

Today, Westwood employs almost 200 programmers, designers and developers, culling new talent from around the globe -- and from around the corner. Still led by Sperry and Castle, the company charts a course between tradition and innovation: recent titles such as Command & Conquer Tiberian Sun expand upon the classic C&C universe with new features, units and gameplay options.

New franchises prove that Westwood remains on the cutting edge of gaming. The company's most recent release, Nox, is an action-heavy fantasy game that rewards the quick-witted gamer who has long tired of the hack-and-slash routine so many role-playing games fall into. Upcoming titles such as Renegade and Red Alert 2 assure Westwood's hard-earned position as an industry leader. Other titles such as the upcoming Pirates of Skull Cove, for the Playstation 2, see the company diving into the next-generation console market.

The company has grown immensely since its 1985 startup, but don't let the big building fool you: Westwood still makes games with all the passion of two guys programming their hearts out in a suburban garage.