

Blitz Games Studios: altruism, recession and the arcade business. Part one

How does an independent developer thrive in the deepening recession? The Arcade division of Blitz Games Studios has some answers...

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CodaChain: one of Blitz Arcade's forthcoming range of cool downloadable titles...

Founded by eighties coding legends Andrew and Philip Oliver and tucked away down a side street in sleepy Leamington Spa, [Blitz Games Studios](#) has spent the last two decades diligently becoming one of the UK's largest independent game developers. Back in 1990, when it was known as Interactive Studios, it was just the Olivers holed up in a small office above an employment agency, taking on one staff member a month. Now there are over 200 people working here.

Today, the company operates as a set of semi-autonomous divisions. The most high profile is [Volatile Games](#), currently working on a reboot of Namco's Dead To Rights series. Elsewhere in the building is the serious games division, [TruSim](#), toiling away on some cutting edge medical simulations, and [BlitzTech](#) currently working on a purportedly state-of-the-art 3D engine. I'll look at all those soon.

Then there's [Blitz Arcade](#). Formed in 2006, it's a team of 35 staff mostly working on downloadable titles. "We saw how fundamental digital distribution was going to be for the future of videogames and created this division in response," explains business development director, Chris Swan. "We specialise in games that are essentially 'short-session' and generally of a smaller scope, which gives us an excellent opportunity to generate and retain our own IP".

IP is vital for independent studios. Work on someone else's brand and you can be shoved off the project at any time. Develop a successful franchise of your own and you call the shots. There's really no such thing as stability in the industry right now, but this is as close as it gets. The Blitz Arcade division has also proved useful as a means of cracking new business areas – not only digital distribution on console and [PC](#), but also iPhone development. Diversity is another good survival mechanism these days.

In many ways, this is a model of how independent developers will do business in the coming years. It's all about adaptability. It's about not getting pigeonholed into one genre.

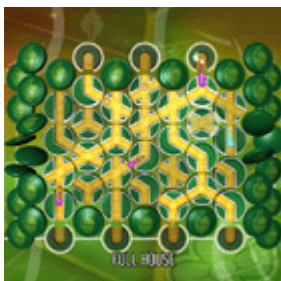
With that in mind, this is what the Arcade team is working on right now...



CodaChain

CodaChain is an interesting place to start. It was originally entered into the [Dare to be Digital](#) game design competition three years ago; Blitz were on the judging panel, loved it and employed the development team to work the prototype up into a commercial release. The game is an interesting mix of puzzler and rhythm action fun, a sort of musical version of Patapon with some Pikmin and Lemmings chucked in.

You're a DJ running round a bright cartoon town collecting variously-skilled followers in order to solve puzzles and defeat the silencers, a shadowy police force that's banned music. Recruit a mime artist, for example, and they can be used to divert the attention of enemies while the rest of your crew slip past. Get a couple of builders to follow you and they can bash through obstacles. The visuals are bright and brash, mixing minimalist toy-like character models with feature-packed locations. As well as the single-player mode, there's a multiplayer option for up to four players, where the aim is to build the longest line of followers while sabotaging rival gangs – sort of a conga version of Snake... Blitz is still finalising formats and a release date.



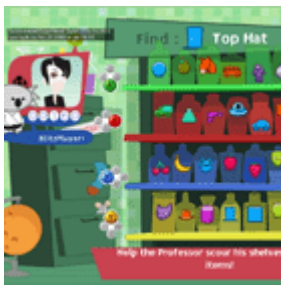
Droplitz

Droplitz is another one with an interesting backstory. In 2006, Blitz started running Game Chart, a new way for internal staff to pitch ideas for development. Using the intranet system, anyone can write up and distribute a quick design brief – everyone else can comment on the idea, suggest changes, or simply vote on concepts they like. At key points throughout the

year, (often coinciding events like GDC, where Blitz will pitch new projects at publishers), the ideas that get the most votes are considered for prototyping and stand a good chance of actually being developed. That's how Droplitz came about.

Swan accurately describes it as a cross between Tetris and the old boardgame Downfall, though there's also an element of PipeMania. Water drips from the top of the screen and you must rotate a series of pipes to channel the fluid toward your collectors. If you create multiple paths simultaneously you earn score combos and generate even more water. It's sort of quietly and soothingly addictive, in the manner of the best casual puzzlers.

The game is currently slated for a spring release, but formats are to be decided and negotiations are taking place. This is how Blitz works sometimes; it self-funds a project, gets it close to a finished product then pitches it out to publishers in order to secure wider distribution and maybe support and funding for a multiplatform release. Right now, this model must be hugely attractive to the publishers, who are busy cutting down on internal staff and looking for low risk ventures. If an independent studio can say 'here's a near finished game, and we can port that onto any platform for you' a lot of the uncertainty is removed.



Encleverment Experiment

Due out in April on XBLA and possibly other formats, Encleverment Experiment is a modestly twisted take on the brain training genre. With a visual style that nods to '50s sci-fi, the focus is on bizarre logic puzzles; you may have to identify the correct route through a maze, pick out daft objects on colour-coded shelves or compete in a race where the hurdles are maths problems. The usual areas – memory, reaction speed, maths, pattern recognition - are tested, but interestingly, all the puzzles are procedurally generated, so you never have to attempt the same version twice. There's a single-player mode which pits you against a series of 15 AI opponents, or you can play in groups of up to four, either at home or online. The multiplayer mode works like a TV quiz show, and players are able to design their own versions of the show, picking and choosing their favourite rounds.

There's also a neat little collecting feature. As you complete puzzles you earn noodles, an in-game currency that can be spent on a range of 60 cute mascot characters. Some, however, can only be attained by achieving certain goals, like answering all the questions correctly in a single round or beating a certain amount of tests. It's a clever extra, and the mascots - clearly influenced by designer toy ranges like Friends With You and Qee - are varied and interesting enough to hook you in.