

Gamer making a career of it

Student develops games, gets Microsoft's attention

By Tricia Bishop | Sun reporter

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UMBC student Arthur Gould explains one of the **Legendary Studios** games. Gould and fellow student Paul Oliver have started **Legendary Studios**, a gaming company that builds creative, nonviolent games. Oliver's affiliation with **Microsoft** and their representative Cy Khormae encouraged the company to donate money to UMBC for an Xbox 360 lab. (Sun photo by Elizabeth Malby / July 20, 2008)

Here's what college student Paul Oliver can't do so well: Count backward or recite the alphabet in reverse, and he's not so good at getting the linear progression of things. He couldn't put a comic strip in order if its panels were mixed up, for example.

That's what he found out from a psychological test pinpointing his learning disorders.

Here's what he can do *really* well: Write computer game programs and get others excited about doing the same.

At 24, Oliver's passion for gaming has grabbed the attention of [Microsoft](#), which chose him to be among a handful of student partners in the Mid-Atlantic, and paid his way to a Seattle convention this week. He also launched a game-development company at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County and has drawn thousands of dollars to build the business from a private investor.

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While Oliver may struggle with spelling and subjects like physics and calculus, his brain just naturally gets gaming and computers. It was always that way, first through playing the games and later through programming them.

As a kid, he turned to gaming to pass the time with friends. As a teenager, he chose game development as his focus in college, mostly to ensure that his classes would capture his interest. And as a senior, he's on his way to making it his career along with business partner and graphic artist Arthur Gould.

Last year, they incorporated a game-development company called **Legendary Studios** on the UMBC campus. They joined the region's cluster of companies that make the state an East Coast hub of game development, though they have yet to finish their first game or bring in revenue.

"They definitely have the drive and the vision to pull something off," said Eric Conn, chief executive of Gloto Corp., in Fulton in Howard County, which distributes video online and on mobile devices.

On the strength of Oliver's energy and ideas, Conn, a UMBC alumnus, gave him about \$20,000 to launch the business. Oliver plans to sell his video games for less than the price of a movie ticket and distribute them over the Internet as downloads.

"I believe in them as people and wanted to help them in any way I could," Conn said. "I wanted to help them achieve their dream and be a part of that."

Many teens fantasize about playing video games for a living, but few follow through. It's a tough industry: 90-plus percent of developed games lose money. UMBC associate professor Marc Olano, director of the school's computer science game development track, likens it to the movie business, with the same benefits and pitfalls.

"There's a lot of money invested up front, it's very expensive to make a game," Olano said. It can take up to two years and \$20 million to develop a game, by some estimates, though downloadable games cost significantly less to make than the packaged versions sold in stores. By the same token, the good ones can also "make a lot of money," Olano said. "The unsuccessful ones can doom a little company."

Legendary Studios is definitely a little company. Oliver and Gould are the core team, though they have a few friends who rotate in as staffers, and they draw interns from campus. But with their initial funding from Conn and the connection to Microsoft Corp., they hope to be better-positioned than other young companies to find backing.

And while Oliver is not necessarily the best programmer on campus, Olano said, he's got something that might be more important.

"[He] gets how building a game is something that always happens with a team, it's not something that you can do yourself," Olano said. "Paul really, I think, has the skills to pull people together, which is critical."

Sunday afternoon at Legendary Studios, in the basement of a UMBC technology center, where the school offers free office space for student companies, Oliver looks more student than executive in khaki shorts and flip-flops. So does Gould, except he's in long pants.

Flat-screen monitors sit side by side on desk tops. A stuffed green dragon - symbolic of their logo, a sort of cross between a phoenix and a dragon - is perched on a computer. Recycling bins line one wall, equipment boxes another.

Gould takes his usual position in a worn-out chair the business inherited with the office and he runs a demonstration video of their *RC Madness* racing game. In it, a miniature car navigates household terrain. So far, they've got the garage scene pretty much done, but they want to add more levels, like a kitchen and bedroom to serve as other racetracks.

Gould is the more laid-back of the two; he's got a calming effect on Oliver, who stands behind one of the black, plush desk chairs he splurged on, holding court.

Oliver talks faster than an auctioneer, his words raining down like a "small hurricane." That's also how he describes his intensity.

"He's a lot of fun," Gould says, but "he can get really angry."

Oliver is prone to outbursts, obsessive caffeine intake (he buys Red Bull by the case at BJ's) and staying up all night to solve programming problems. He packs in projects as though they're necessary for his survival.

"He has always been a motivated and very intense person," said his mother, Joann Oliver. Paul Oliver lives with his parents in Millersville. "If there was something he wanted to do, he wanted to do it as comprehensively as and thoroughly as he could. He's a person with a lot of passion."

In the past year, he:

- Founded the company.

- Started a gaming curriculum for Springbrook High School in Silver Spring. ("He just wanted to do it, I really think he enjoys teaching young programmers," said Advanced Placement computer science teacher Pat Yongpradit.)

- Organized a conference to promote Microsoft's free XNA game-development tools at UMBC (which indirectly led Microsoft to donate 20 Xboxes and \$10,000 worth of software for a new school game lab).

- Created, with Gould, a professional-grade game for Microsoft's Zune mobile media player.

- And was chosen as a Microsoft "student partner" - sort of an ambassador for the company's technology. He's one of about 190 such partners in the United States, 23 in the Mid-Atlantic states with a handful in Maryland (there are two student partners at the University of Maryland, [College Park](#) campus; Oliver's the only one at UMBC). He gets perks like a laptop and software, and he gets paid, though he's officially an employee of a contractor hired by Microsoft and not the corporation itself.

"He doesn't sleep," said Cy Khormae, a Microsoft "Academic Developer Evangelist" who works with Oliver.

Oliver's Microsoft connection has served him and Legendary Studios pretty well. The company paid for Gould and Oliver to attend the Microsoft-sponsored Gamefest conference in Seattle this week for game developers and publishers - those who fund the development of the games and then sell them. Gould and Oliver are hoping to find a publisher for their game while there, so they can afford to finish it and get it to market, then get to work on making more.

"If I could make games ... do a little bit of teaching and a little bit of developing for the rest of my life," Oliver said. "I'd be happy."

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