



# Medicine now a fun hobby for Edmonton's game boys

Richard Cairney

Playing video games was once a stimulating diversion from the rigours of medical school for Drs. Greg Zeschuk and Ray Muzyka. Now it's their claim to fame.

These electronic game connoisseurs have turned their hobby into a highly successful business, BioWare, that is recognized as one of the best in the world. BioWare started as a medical software company in the early 1990s, when the 2 family physicians designed and marketed CD-ROMs for use as educational tools.

Though they didn't know it at the time, creating electronic games to help other medical students hone their diagnostic skills would eventually let them teach electronic gamers around the world how to fly with a ribbon parachute and wipe out giant robotic opponents on their PCs.

Their most popular game, *Baldaur's Gate*, ranks as the second-best selling computer game in the world just 1 year after it hit the market. Late this fall, just in time for Christmas, BioWare will re-release one of its popular role-playing games, *MDK2*, for the new Sega Dreamcast video console. *Baldaur's Gate* is also being reconfigured for the Sega game player, and a new game that's in development, *Neverwinter Knights*, will be released next year. It will offer players the chance to launch their game online, for up to 64 players.

More products are in development, but in the highly competitive world of video games these new products are so top secret that no one is allowed to talk about them. "It's a courtesy to our publisher," says Zeschuk.

Gradually, these 2 gamers from the University of Alberta medical school turned their play into a full-time job. The youthful staff of 65 at BioWare's offices on Edmonton's trendy Whyte Avenue look as though they're just playing around as they design detailed graphics and write the code that pulls off impressive special effects. Mountain bikes, some in different states of assembly, are parked in and around the offices. The office uniform is casual, with sandals, jeans and T-shirts. Not one suit or tie was in sight.

BioWare has been nominated for an entrepreneur-of-the-year award and Muzyka is worried about the implica-

tions. "We'll have to wear suits for that, and that's a little bit disconcerting," he says. Zeschuk derives great pleasure from this dilemma — he'll be out of town that weekend and will dodge the problem entirely.

The office's hallways are lined with blueprint-style drawings of fantasy worlds cooked up by writers, drawn by artists and then rendered into electronic form by programmers. The centrepiece of the lunchroom is a big-screen TV, where the employees beat the tar out of each other on new games — staff members had their hands on a Dreamcast game before its initial release and couldn't put their control pads down.

Zeschuk and Muzyka play games too, helping staff debug programs in development. "BioWare's advantage is that we make good, quality, fun games," says Zeschuk. "Thousands of games are made every year, but not all of them are fun. Unlike a lot of companies where the boss is a big suit who isn't involved in production, we play hundreds of games every year."

"It's really a dream job," adds Muzyka.

But it isn't all fun and games. Muzyka has begun studying for an MBA through the University of Western Ontario, and as joint CEOs of a high-tech firm that has earned an international reputation, the family physicians have hectic schedules. If

they aren't at gaming conventions, they're hosting reporters from gaming magazines published around the world.

And they still find time to practise medicine — at least a little. Zeschuk worked as a GP in a local practice for 5 years, but he stepped down in May. He now works some overnight shifts at Edmonton's Glenrose Rehabilitation Hospital. Muzyka continues to take work on call at emergency rooms in rural hospitals. Neither can foresee a time when they'll leave medicine entirely. "The less you do it, the more you appreciate it when you are doing it," explains Zeschuk.

"I find it's almost like a holiday," adds Muzyka. "It's a working holiday, but you leave all the stresses of this place behind."

Medicine, he says, doesn't feel like work. "It's not so much a job as a fun hobby. For us, it's like video games and medicine have flipped roles. One used to be a hobby and the other used to be a job." ?



Drs. Zeschuk (left) and Muzyka: electronic game entrepreneurs

Darren Greenwood