

# BIG HUGE GAMES

Tim played the role of the Black Knight in the multimedia portion of *Magic: The Gathering*.



Interview with Game Developer Tim Train

**Even if you're not an avid gamer, you've probably heard of games Tim Train has worked on: *Colonization*, *Civilization II*, *Alpha Centauri*, *Gettysburg*, and 2003 PC Game of the Year *Rise of Nations*. Over the years, Tim has worked with some of the industry's most innovative game companies, including Microprose, Firaxis, and Big Huge Games, a company he cofounded in 2001. In this interview, Tim describes a career that started with testing games and led to producing and designing them—and still involves a lot of playing for a living.**

**U** read on the Big Huge Web site that you have a degree in international relations. How did you end up in the games industry?

I went to college without knowing what I wanted to do with my life. When I graduated, I still had no idea of what I wanted to do. IR was a good major, but I didn't want to go into foreign service, and I wasn't ready to do international business. While I was getting my bearings after college, I did a lot of temping.

Then, one day at the fencing club, I started talking to another fencer who happened to be a game designer for a local company called Microprose. It turned out that they had a sudden desperate need for game testers because two people had just left the company.

**Did you have the background for that job?**

I didn't have a lot of technical background. I knew word processing, and I had certainly played a lot of Nintendo when I was in college. Nowadays, the entry bar for a tester, technically, is fairly high; you have to know a lot of computer science in addition to having played a lot of games. At the time, though, my experience was enough, and I joined Microprose in 1991. There, I tested games for about a year and a half, and then I managed the test department for about another year and a half.

The timing was good, because CD-ROMs were just becoming big, which translated into a need for multimedia content to fill up those CDs. I did multimedia work on *Colonization*, *Civilization II*, and

a game called *F-14 Defender*. I did a lot of filming—for example, I would go to Colonial Williamsburg and film reenactors, or to the Naval Air Station to film planes. When Microprose was bought out, one of the partners left and started a company called Firaxis. I went there to work on the multimedia for their title *Gettysburg*.

**Had you had experience with filming?**

No, I learned that all on the job. I had a mentor in multimedia at Microprose who really taught me a lot about movie making and about the technical end, so I learned a lot.

I did multimedia for about a year and a half at Firaxis and then moved on to be a producer and a designer for *Alpha Centauri*, a space-exploration game.

**What does a producer do?**

There are three main kinds of expertise that go into making a computer game: programming, art, and design. The producer is responsible for making sure that those experts are talking to each other. If the designers decide, for example, that

they want the game to include a camel-riding unit, the producer will go to the artists and the programmers and put together schedules to make that happen.

The producer is also responsible for the relationship with the publisher who puts out the game and is usually the point of contact for marketing.

### And what does the designer do?

Designers come up with content for the game; they serve a role similar to screenwriters for films. Usually there will be a lead designer, who is responsible for the content decisions, and a team of designers working with him. A lot of their job really is playing games and extracting ideas about what makes a great game. They might also be responsible for generating content. For example, we want our single-player campaigns to have a nice story arc; a player might start off as a lowly general, and by the end become an emperor and get to take over the world. That requires designers who script out scenarios.

Designers also have to balance the game. In a strategy game, players might have the ability to produce military units, like bowmen or spearmen or phalanxes. As a designer, you don't want one unit to be so powerful that it's the only one people will build. If you make the tanks really powerful, for example, then people will only build tanks. So the tanks need to have a weakness—maybe bazooka troops can take out the tanks, and infantrymen can take out the bazookas, and tanks can take out the infantrymen. There's a kind of rock-paper-scissors element to it. The player probably won't abstract it out to that level, but the designer has to.

### This makes me think of *Rise of Nations*, which includes units like those. How did you guys get started on that game?

There had been a crop of real-time strategy games, most notably *Age of Empires II* and *StarCraft*, that were fantastical, phenomenal games, and we spent a lot of time playing those at Firaxis. We would sit around and say, "wouldn't it be cool if you could do this," or "I hate it

when it does this," and "here's how you could fix this."

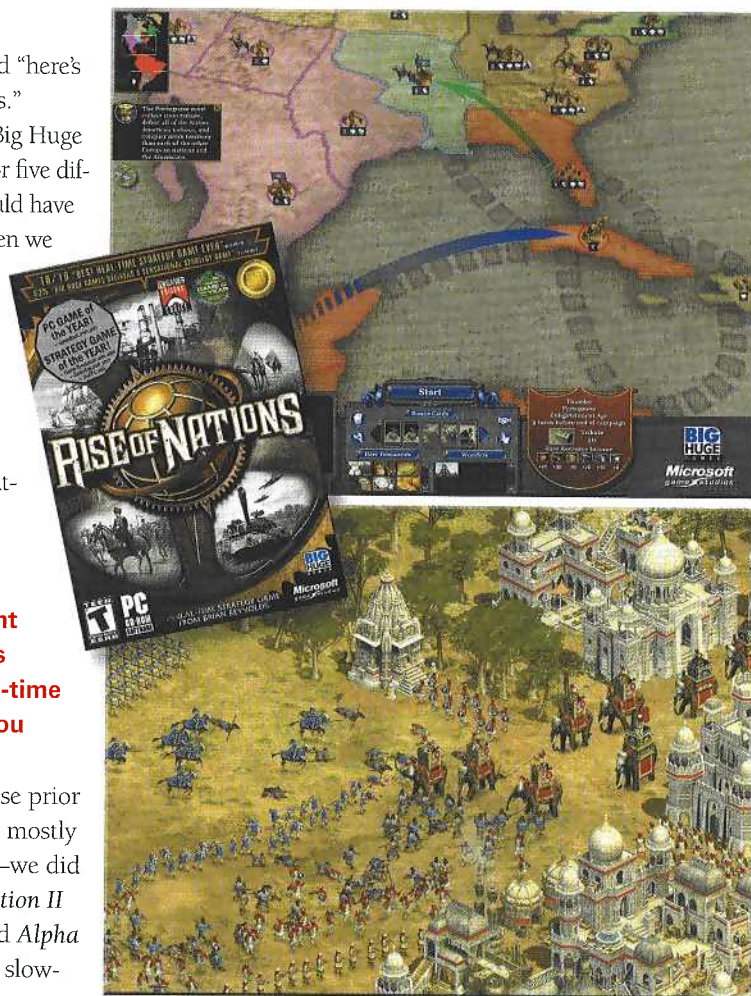
When we started Big Huge in 2001, we had four or five different ideas that we could have made into a game. When we went around to publishers, we pitched different ideas, but we were most excited about *Rise of Nations*. We all wanted to do a historical real-time strategy game.

### Reviews of *Rise of Nations* always point out that it combines turn-taking and real-time strategy. Why did you decide to do that?

Our team's expertise prior to *Rise of Nations* was mostly in turn-based games—we did a game called *Civilization II* and then a game called *Alpha Centauri*, which was a slow-paced and very deliberate game. It was like you were on a game board and could move your pieces around. You could manage your economy and fiddle around with your cities and take as long as you wanted.

But in real-time games, everything is happening at once: the other guy is coming in with his army and you have to decide *right now* what to do. The player's bandwidth—what he can pay attention to—becomes a resource. In those games, you can only pay attention to a certain number of things, and you have to make decisions: am I going to pay more attention to diplomacy or to military? The time pressure adds an interesting intensity to the games.

While our team's history was in *designing* turn-based games, we really loved *playing* real-time games. We wanted to enter the real-time market but also keep some of the aspects of turn-based games, such as a bigger scope. Turn-based games can be about the entire world or about big spans of time.



In *Rise of Nations*, players can command the fate of empires in seven different epochs through all of human history. In the bottom photo, a line of Indian war elephants defends against an invasion by Alexander the Great's phalanxes.

### I assume that a lot of historical research must have gone into this game. Did your IR come in handy?

If you're designing a history game, a history or literature background is really helpful. The design staff by and large reads a lot of history, so we all have some background in it. We have two huge bookshelves filled with materials about different kinds of military units. The *Men in Arms* reference series goes into depth about different weapons, costume styles, tactics, and history—there's stuff from the Sumerian warriors of the 8th century BC, the Mongol invaders of the 1200s, you name it—and we drew a lot of the visual stuff from that.

We also had a historian on staff for a while to help with the specific historical research, such as what a Bantu spearman would have looked like.

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