



Bungie Jump Up to Disney

Alexander Seropian is distinguished for being a creative visionary in the video game industry. The founder of Bungie Software, Wideload Games and the architect of the highly successful “Halo” series – one of the most successful video game franchises of all time – Seropian is now spearheading the revitalization of Disney’s video game catalog while also bringing his foresight to Armenia in this summer’s unveiling of the Tumo Center in Yerevan.

Text Manouk Akopyan | Photo Tigran Tovmasyan

↓
Alexander Seropian in “Legends Plaza” of the Walt Disney Studio lot in Burbank, California.



If PS3 and Xbox are not the only two words you’re familiar with when it comes to video games, then you’ll never forget the glory days of gaming when Mario, Pac-Man and Zelda ruled the entertainment and gaming universe. Back in May 1991, when mastering the science of doctoring game cartridges with alcohol-drenched cotton swabs and taking the original Game Boy to parties was actually cool, a young 20-something mathematics graduate from the University of Chicago living on his father’s couch decided that he was going to start his own business in the ever-evolving world of video games. The final verdict for Alexander Seropian was forming his own company, Bungie Software – a corporation of one operating strictly out of an apartment room. Finishing a distant second was the advice of his father, Richard Herach, to get a regular job within the industry. After all, both of his grandparents were entrepreneurs, and the Atari 2600-playing Seropian had already taught himself programming and writing games on his father’s Mac while only in high school. With creating, packaging and shipping games out from a basement in Hyde Park, Chicago now long gone, Seropian has somewhat of a similar task with his current project in springing Disney Interactive Studios back into the gaming market and spearheading the company’s global creative studios as its Senior Vice President and General Manager of Core Games. “Disney is all about making special entertainment with heart, which really means making cool stuff that our fans in every category, from young to old, like. A lot of what we are doing is bringing people – and families – together. That’s our bread and butter,” says Seropian on a beautiful spring afternoon from his headquarters in Glendale, California. “The enthusiast gamer, where

the industry really grew out of, is older than your traditional Disney fan, but we still aspire to produce great content for anybody playing games.” Earlier this year, Disney shifted its focus away from expensive console games to focus on online and mobile entertainment. Under its new outlined structure, Seropian was placed to oversee game development, as well as five game studios (Blackrock, Junction Point, Avalanche, Wideload and Gamestar). Disney’s digital media group reported a net loss of \$787 million over the last three fiscal years on revenues of nearly \$2.2 billion. Seropian, with an unparalleled track record, is now at the helm of Disney’s renaissance. He says that customers will see a lot more thoughtful focus and control in the creating process that will increase the quality of Disney’s games. Seropian notes that nowadays, production cycles are shorter, which in essence allows him and his team to be more creatively productive with the arsenal of Disney characters and subsidiaries – which is a powerful tool at his disposal, he admits. “I’m very much focused right now on taking all the fantastic ingredients, whether it be the great talent we have, the investment we are willing to commit, the properties and ideas, and turning all of that into a great success,” he says. “I’ve always found that persistence is a critical element to success. You have to believe in what you do.” Success is nothing new to Seropian, which first came his way in Bungie Software and a repertoire based on a background of first-person shooters (FPS). His company, which eventually grew from the initial corporation of one, introduced such titles as “Pathways Into Darkness,” “Operation Desert Storm,” “Minotaur: The Labyrinths of Crete,” and the cream of the crop, the “Marathon” and “Myth” computer game series. ▶

“I’m very much focused right now on taking all the fantastic ingredients, whether it be the great talent we have, the investment we are willing to commit, the properties and ideas, and turning all of that into a great success,” he says.

At the turn of the millennium, Seropian cashed in on his fast-growing company and negotiated an acquisition with Bill Gates' Microsoft Corp. He stayed on board and moved to Seattle after the buyout. His job changed from being the chief entrepreneur of Bungie to running the division for Microsoft. His monumental feat for the company – and overall in gaming history – entailed overseeing the development, production and delivery of the critically acclaimed and highly successful game “Halo.” “Halo” was the flagship title for the 2001 launch of the Xbox video game system, which has since sold millions of copies and made billions of dollars. “I think that did pretty well,” Seropian laughs. “I ultimately left to go back to Chicago and start a family,” he says. Seropian had married his wife Laura in 1994 and after working close to 80-hour weeks, he thought to himself, “I should probably say ‘Hi’ to my wife. The company and the team was very well set up at Microsoft, so it was the right time to focus on my personal goals.” So Seropian went from building video games to building a family in Chicago. He now has three kids: Amelia Eve, 8; Owen Yervant, 6; and Ivy Annik, 3, and all three of them are the customers he cares about the most. He says that he pays attention to the behaviors of his children – all already ardent, tech-savvy gamers. In 2003, Seropian himself also gave life to another triumphant gaming company in Wideload Games, the studio of which he negotiated the acquisition to Disney upon his 2009 arrival. “I was contemplating on coming out to Los Angeles and working for Disney; because of my background, it wasn't the obvious move for me. I'm not going to make a secret about it; part of the reason for coming to Disney was because of my kids.

“Customers are very opinionated and fickle. They are very discerning to the extent that you can be successful. There is some personal motivation to being successful, and it becomes gratifying. I'd like to be known for entertaining people; for making great, fun games.”



When I thought about the opportunity, I went ‘Wow. Disney has so many great characters and stories and to do something meaningful with games is really amazing.’ And that's really what my vision is right now, to make good on that promise and over-deliver on the guest experience.” One promise that is very near and dear to Seropian's heart is with his involvement in the Toumanian Park Center project in Yerevan – set for a grand opening later this summer in Yerevan. The “Tumo Center,” named in honor of famous poet and writer Hovhannes Toumanian, is to give the Armenian youth a state-of-the-art technology center where instructors expose them to the fields of digital filmmaking and media creation, video game development, animation, and web development, among other IT fields. With computing and technology galore, the Tumo Center is set to be the most advanced building in Armenia.

↑ Seropian oversees game development and direction for Disney video games and its studios.

A Career in Games

Alexander Seropian was born in New York on October 21, 1969. His father, Richard Herach, was born in New York as well. His mother Susan, is British. Seropian also lived with his grandfather Yervant, an entrepreneur businessman who had a photo engraving business in New York City. Prior to that, when he first arrived in the United States around 1915, he was selling rugs. Bringing over 20 years of gaming experience, Seropian joined

Disney Interactive Studios in September 2009 when he negotiated the acquisition of Wideload Games, his second-founded gaming company. He is currently the Senior Vice President and General Manager of Core Games at Disney Interactive Studios. As CEO of Wideload Games, founded in 2003 and based out of Chicago, Seropian released such games as “Stubbs the Zombie in Rebel Without a Pulse,” “Hail to the Chimp,”

“Texas Cheat ‘Em and Cyclomite.” Prior to that, he was at Bungie Software, his first-founded gaming company. Disney Interactive Studios, which publishes and distributes a broad portfolio of multi-platform video games, mobile games and interactive entertainment, is based in Glendale, California, and has internal development studios with 700 employees based in key markets worldwide.

↓ The road for Seropian will lead him to Armenia and the opening of the Tumo Center in August.



The initiator of the project, Sam Simonian, an Internet entrepreneur from Dallas, reached out to Seropian to join the advisory board. “The idea is to teach skills and encourage the kids that really excel on how to incubate and begin local business projects. We are aiming for it to be like an after school program where the kids can go. It's a fantastic project with a significant amount of resources,” says Seropian. His 2009 trip to Armenia included meeting Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan, visiting the Geghard Monastery, sampling a variety of freshly cooked

lahmajoun from side walk cafes, resulting in what he calls an “amazing” trip. He'll get to do it all over again when he goes back for the grand opening this summer. “My most memorable experience was meeting the kids in Armenia,” he says. “It's so amazing to travel all the way around the world and meet these kids who all want the same things kids everywhere else want. They were so enthusiastic and talented, just waiting for opportunities. I'm hopeful my next trip will be even better as we will be opening the center, and will be delivering opportunities to these fantastic kids.” These days, the personable Seropian is still a kid at heart himself, just like growing up with his Atari and bowls of Fruity Pebbles. He no longer has the time to spend entire weekends camped out in his man cave at home, lost in such games as “Red Dead.” So he gets his fix wherever he goes, which is usually though his iPad. Whether staying true to his origins of PC Gaming, Playstation, or Xbox, he says that it's all about the actual experience more than it is about the devices for him. He notes that it will not take long until families have grandiose social experiences around TV sets and other powerful platforms that involve multiple devices connecting together in a cooperative, multi-player event – all in high definition – yet very simple, and intuitive. “That's what's really going to drive an explosive growth in gaming, when gaming becomes like TV. Easily. In the future, we are going to be making stuff that is in everyone's devices,” he says. “It all starts with what is actually there, what you actually make and what you actually do. Success opens opportunities. In our industry, more than any other, our customers are very opinionated and fickle. They are very discerning to the extent that you can be successful. There is some personal motivation to being successful, and it becomes gratifying. I'd like to be known for entertaining people; for making great, fun games.” The future for Seropian is one that is always in the now, making socially and culturally relevant games. A man known for original thinking does not even want to imagine about where the industry will be by 2020. “It will be connected to your brain!” he jokes. With a lifetime of programming, producing and developing backing that very statement, one should not be surprised if that'll be the case – with the visionary Seropian probably standing right behind it holding the honors. ■