

MISSION DEPLOY



ALEX SEROPIAN'S LATEST VENTURE IN GAMING IS SET TO SHAKE THE INDUSTRY. THE CREATOR OF THE HALO FRANCHISE HAS ASSEMBLED A DREAM TEAM THAT'S PROMISING TO BRING THE FIRST PERSON SCI-FI SHOOTER EXPERIENCE TO TABLETS AND SMART PHONES WITH THEIR FLAGSHIP TITLE MORNING STAR. CORE GAMERS, REJOICE!

Text Manouk Akopyan

It's the year 2130 and you are Charlie Campbell on the research vessel MSRV-Joplin sent to investigate a mysterious signal coming from the Earth's solar system. Then – catastrophe strikes – sending you and your crew into a galaxy stricken with alien conflict.

...And then the door bell rings. Your company has arrived, and you're caught between fending off an unwelcome sniper radiating your forehead and getting up to greet your guests. So you toss your iPad on the coffee table and return to the reality of the evening's festivities.

Such is the trend of a 2013 gamer, as subtle and promiscuous as ever in an industry full-fledged in flux. Alex Seropian founded Industrial Toys in 2012 to specifically fill a gap in the market. The pragmatic goal was to make quality mobile games for core



→ Charlie Campbell by lead concept artist Mike Choi.

LOFTY GOALS SHOULDN'T BE FAR-FETCHED FOR SEROPIAN. HE'S ALREADY LEFT A MONUMENTAL MARK IN GAMING BY OVERSEEING THE DEVELOPMENT, PRODUCTION AND DELIVERY OF THE CRITICALLY ACCLAIMED AND HIGHLY SUCCESSFUL HALO.



← Morning Star poster by Roger Kupelian

gamers. A year later, with that being the sole mission of his startup, they're launching *Morning Star* on Apple iOS devices this summer.

Morning Star is designed for players whose three-minute play session can eventually pull them into a rabbit hole. Seropian says you can get through the storyline in a few hours, but specifically notes that the game is designed for competitive multi-players, one of *Morning Star's* main pillars. Using Epic Games' Unreal Engine 3 technology, the visually striking game is built around community, mechanics designed for touch-powered mobile devices, enemy artificial intelligence, and dynamic encounter design. Industrial Toys focused on an engaging story and rewarding gameplay. In return, it allows for a fast-paced, easy-to-play tempo that could trap you in the deeper world they've created.

"The reality is that if you don't have a great experience in a one or two minute span on mobile,

you're not going to come back. That's not what we want," says Seropian.

The "we" he refers to reads like a who's who in gaming. Seropian gathered what he calls a dream team of like-minded enthusiasts with a depth of talent across every division. Spearheading the project are established industry veterans like President Tim Harris, Executive Creative Director Hardy LeBel, Chief Technology Officer Brent Pease, Lead Game Designer Paul Bertone, and Lead Concept Artist Mike Choi. Harris, formerly the founder and CEO at Seven Lights, calls the intimate team of 20 a group of "cynical, crusty, and opinionated bastards" who want to make sure they deliver on their promise of making a great game.

"The culture and chemistry of the company trumps everything," adds LeBel. "Most of our senior leadership has worked together in the past, so when Alex called with the opportunity, I couldn't pass it up." Johnny Skwirut, a 25-year-old in marketing and production, considers the tight knit bunch one he can grab a beer with after work. Luckily, there's a brewery conveniently situated in front of their Pasadena, Calif. studio.

Morning Star is also peppered with mainstream star power. System of a Down frontman Serj Tankian wrote the full musical score to the game, and bestselling science fiction novelist John Scalzi is penning *Morning Star Alpha*. The graphic novel will further explore the universe he's creating for the game.

"When you put all of these things together, you create a place where people can go – whether for a



↑ Dust Ascended
→ Dust Ascended concept art



↓ Roger Kupelian's concept painting of the end of the world.



few minutes or a few hours a day – to get something out of it. It has to be the whole package for it to be super successful," says Seropian.

Lofty goals shouldn't be far-fetched for Seropian, who's anticipating millions of players to download the game. He's already left a monumental mark in gaming by overseeing the development, production and delivery of the critically acclaimed and highly successful *Halo*. Last we met with Seropian (Issue 14, July/August 2011), he was leading Disney's global creative studios as its Senior Vice President and General Manager of Core Games.

↑ Chief Technology Officer Brent Pease, Executive Creative Director Hardy LeBel, Art Manager Aaron Marroquin, and Alex Seropian

After two and a half years, he became restless with Mickey Mouse and Goofy and resigned in Feb. 2012 to get in touch with his independent roots. Seropian founded two gaming companies then negotiated the acquisitions of both – Bungie Studios to Microsoft before the 2001 launch of Xbox and Wideload Games to Disney in 2009.

The 43-year-old has made a killing – figuratively by way of capital and literally with a hit list of shooter games. So why did he spurn the console market that was so good to him for over 20 years?

"Making games at Disney became very expensive and difficult," says Seropian. "We had 200 people on each project, and tens of millions of dollars were spent just to get the game done. And then, double that for marketing and distribution."

Seropian says he became frustrated with the overall industry trend and bounced for the luxury of accessing a market for a fraction of the cost. Mobile games are electronically packaged, which means no distribution costs, manufacturing discs, shipment, retail space and the other costs of doing business. His enthusiasm and dedication for making games, however, hasn't dimmed.

"I moved to a more simple idea with a small group of folks and wanted to do something that was unprecedented." ▶

USING EPIC GAMES' UNREAL ENGINE 3 TECHNOLOGY, THE VISUALLY STRIKING GAME IS BUILT AROUND COMMUNITY, MECHANICS DESIGNED FOR TOUCH-POWERED MOBILE DEVICES, ENEMY ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE, AND DYNAMIC ENCOUNTER DESIGN.

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Roger Kupelian puts his own spin on the launch of the Joplin in this concept painting.



He says simple cost-cutting ingredients, focusing on a new marketplace, and hitting the reset button on ideology were the impetus of Industrial Toys. “Any startup company has its risks,” says Industrial Toys President Tim Harris, “but this is a good one because the industry is booming.” Seropian heralds the future as a fusion of talent that’s hitting the work force at an opportune time. His tone is enthusiastic, especially when he talks about the coming generation who combine a blend of energy, passion and knowledge and choose four years in video games as collegiate career paths. Seropian taught himself how to write and program games on his father’s Mac in high school. They are all the reasons why he’s documented the making of *Morning Star* into instructional webisodes for the students at Tumo Center for Creative Technologies, Armenia’s state of the art open media studio.

He’s also not afraid to experiment – like tasking a 3D artist intern who was still in high school with creating the graybox model for the MSRJV-Joplin, the game’s spaceship that transports heroes out to meet doom and adventure. Ruben Avoian was responsible for the shape and outline of the ship, adding details, functional bits and the beginnings of how the animated ship would work. The finished product was a twelve-million polygram model so dense, some of the computers couldn’t handle it.

“I was given the opportunity to make something amazing and share my work within the world of *Morning Star*. This is my first job, and I couldn’t ask for a cooler boss than Alex. He and the team have been great,” Avoian says, now 19 and working as a contractor for Industrial Toys. “My parents have been getting more satisfaction out of it than I have. They show the game’s trailer and point out the model to every person who comes to our house.”

With *Morning Star*, Seropian remained true to his first-person-shooter (FPS) roots, even though he says it’s not much of a popular genre on mobile. However, he’s confident in building a brand that’ll stand the test of time in today’s competitive landscape. Although the game can be downloaded free of charge, he considers Industrial Toys’ business opportunities as being very real; he is content without a profit margin in the immediate future. His group of investors agrees. Industrial Toys is backed to survive a cold and dark winter – or two.

“We have the challenge of fulfilling a niche for FPS core gamers because what we saw in the market sucked,” he says. “Is it impossible to make a great game? Or are there just untapped opportunities? We decided it was the latter. We have a great opportunity to own the genre and establish a franchise and go on for a long period of time.”

ALEX SEROPIAN FOUNDED INDUSTRIAL TOYS TO SPECIFICALLY FILL A GAP IN THE MARKET. THE PRAGMATIC GOAL WAS TO MAKE QUALITY MOBILE GAMES FOR CORE GAMERS. A YEAR LATER, WITH THAT BEING THE SOLE MISSION OF HIS STARTUP, THEY’RE LAUNCHING MORNING STAR.

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Ruben Avoian worked on the MSRJV-Joplin, the game’s spaceship.



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Mike Dekoekkoek (front) and Johnny Skwirut are part of the intimate team of 20 at Industrial Toys.

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Iteration of the Joplin with the bridge at the top of the end of vessel to add drama out of the space.

“We are betting on the trend that gamers want to have a deeper, more immersive experience in mobile,” adds Harris.

“We’re the only company on the market that’s recognizable and has the credibility to do it,” says Pease. “We’re ready to take advantage of that and be that breakout game. That’s our mission. There’s no barrier of entry. It’s only the perception.”

Traditional American game publishers have largely deprived the mobile market of quality game experiences, Seropian says. On the flip side, countries overseas have had considerable success in the App Store with their products: cases in point are Finland’s Supercell and Rovio and the Czech Republic’s MADFINGER Games.

Seropian offers a plausible explanation. “For the first time we’re in a market where the biggest marketplace is not the United States. Countries throughout Scandinavia and Asia...they are going straight to mobile. This market will be growing tremendously, especially outside of the U.S. The biggest challenge is that there is no shortage of products, but the average quality is very low. We’ll start seeing better games and experimentation of different genres. The trial and error will get better. With mobile games in particular, people have a lot of options to choose from. They often don’t stick with the experience, and it’s very competitive that way.”

The iOS market Industrial Toys plans on catering to with *Morning Star* currently hovers around half a billion – the number of iPads, iPhones and iPod Touches sold since 2007. Factor in the possibility of moving the game to the Android market, which they are considering, the potential audience doubles.

“I want to make something that’s new, different, and a lot of fun. It’s personally rewarding,” Seropian says. “That’s what I wanted to do and I am having a frickin’ blast with it!”

When asked what kind of expectations he’s set out for Industrial Toys and *Morning Star*, he answers, “I want to make the best mobile game – ever.”

Seropian’s innate leadership will give Industrial Toys the blueprint to lead the next generation of mobile game developers while at the same demanding serious respect. Angry Birds, Bejeweled, Whale Trail, et al – consider this a warning from your FPS adversary. ■