

y Bart G. Farkas

Mixed Metaphor Software recently left the realms of shareware, where they produced such games as *Soldiers in the Sun*, and have entered the commercial arena. Their first title, *Derrat Sorcerum*, is reviewed elsewhere in this issue. We managed to catch up with Joshua Rothman and Ben Spees of Mixed Metaphor, just in time to wrangle a few answers out of them.

IMG: Tell us about Mixed Metaphor Software. Where did it come from?

BEN: Well, Mixed Metaphor was around a long time before we released a product. For a long time I'd wanted to do a big, big game, and our shareware products were just means to an end in that sense. Mixed Metaphor really grew out of *Derrat Sorcerum*, and we really formed the company just to develop that game. As time went on we started releasing shareware, but Mixed Metaphor essentially started with *Derrat Sorcerum*.

IMG: How many employees do you have, and what are their backgrounds?

BEN: Well, we're basically a two-man operation. Josh and I do all the real fundamental work -- all the conceptual stuff, all the planning, and we try to do as much of the work ourselves as possible. So we really have two employees. We go outside for things we simply can't do well, like music. A new project we're working on is so big that it's just not possible to do all the art in-house, so we had to hire people to do some of it for us. I mean, we're both still students. We can't work full-time. We do tend to hire the same people over and over again; Eric Speier, our music guy, he's just great, and we've come back to him again and again. But he's not really an "employee", if you see what I mean.

IMG: Are you a Mac-Only company?

BEN: Definitely. Josh and I really feel that the Macintosh platform is superior in so many ways that it's not even a question - we would never develop on anything but the Mac. I mean, we'd be receptive if someone wanted to port one of our products over, but I don't think we'd develop for the PC ourselves. We certainly wouldn't mind having some PC products out there.

JOSH: As long as we don't have to touch them!

BEN: Yeah, really.

IMG: Does publishing on the Mac afford you any advantages in your opinion?

JOSH: Absolutely. We're Mac people, and if the end product is for the Mac we get to use them from the beginning of a project all the way through the release. I think that makes both of us a lot happier. Not to mention that it lets us avoid all the tech support problems that come with the PC market. We just can't afford to hire a fleet of tech support people to deal with all the technical issues over there. And the farther we are from Win95, the better off we both are!

IMG: You are known for some shareware work, what made you take the leap to >the commercial realm?

BEN: Well, I think it's almost the other way around; we went from commercial to shareware. I mean, DS was really the idea behind Mixed Metaphor --

JOSH: We essentially started out to produce DS, not other products --

BEN: -- and we started doing shareware because these games would just kind of present themselves, if you know what I mean. I'd be screwing around and out would come P'tong, and we'd recognize it as a pretty good idea and turn it into something bigger. Some of them actually came from comp sci projects of mine, and we just said, 'Hey, this is a good idea,' and ended up with shareware.

JOSH: But releasing DS as a commercial CD-ROM was always the ultimate goal. I don't think we ever abandoned DS as a long-term idea, we never really put it on the back burner.

IMG: Did you ever consider going purely the shareware route ala Ambrosia?

BEN: No. We always wanted to make a game like Derrat Sorcerum, a big sprawling CD-ROM adventure, but we never thought it would really be possible for us in the position that we were in, at least not for a while.. We were very interested in writing games, so that's how our shareware came about. But after we had a lot of DS completed, and we showed it around to publishers, it seemed pretty clear that we'd release commercially.

It's not so much that we made a leap to the commercial realm; we are still committed to writing shareware and do have future shareware products planned. But there are some kinds of games for which shareware just isn't an option, and Derrat Sorcerum is one of those. For one thing, it's just not logistically possible to distribute a product that may be hundreds of megabytes online. For another, a product like ours requires a huge amount of time and effort. We spent over three years developing and getting Derrat Sorcerum published, and you can understand why we wouldn't want anyone to be able to download and play the whole game for free and then decide whether or not they felt like paying for it. Of course, there are great shareware authors out there, like the guys at Ambrosia, who also put a lot of time and effort into their shareware -- and we do too -- but it's just not on the same level.

And there's a sense of accomplishment in releasing a commercial product that you don't really get with shareware. I mean, when I opened the box containing the first shrinkwrapped

copies of the game - it's an indescribable feeling.

IMG: Derrat Sorcerum has a unique perspective. Was this something you were specifically aiming for?

JOSH: I think we decided early on that we wanted the game to have a really cinematic feel, and we decided that that meant third-person perspective. DS really isn't the kind of game where an overhead view (like in Realmz) would work. We wanted it to feel sort of epic and sweeping, and we felt that first-person, that whole "interfaceless- interface" thing, was just so overused, that third-person was pretty much the obvious choice.

IMG: What was the biggest obstacle you had to overcome to get this game finished and released?

BEN: Well, we really didn't have a lot of money. And, needless to say, that caused problems.

JOSH: It wasn't like we couldn't buy hardware or whatever, it's that we wanted to produce a high-quality product, and we had to do some things the hard way instead of the expensive way. Like the chroma keying -- a lot of that was done by hand, in front of home-made blue screens, and we had to deal with using our friends as "employees" a lot of the time.

BEN: Yeah, we really had to do a lot of scrounging, trying to really find the money to do something or having to do it ourselves. That slowed us down a lot, it made everything a lot more difficult. It's hard to compete with the multi-million dollar studios out there.

JOSH: Still, I think we did a good job. We had quite a few sort of obscure workarounds, we did a lot of work "by hand" on the computer, but what came out looks very professional. We're both really pleased.

Drew Wilkins (Corin) during a video shoot.

IMG: Do you think the Mac gaming market is alive and kicking?

JOSH: Well, there's no doubt that Apple could be doing better. But things just aren't as grim as a lot of people like to believe. I mean, you have to keep it in perspective; those losses were really the result of expansion and price cuts, and now the Mac is becoming a real competitor in the home market. The more computers they sell, the more developers sign on and the more compelling the software gets, and it's sort of a cycle, where compelling software dictates machine sales. And with the clones and the new technology Apple is giving developers, I think it's safe to say that things are looking up. In the next few years you'll probably see a lot more games developed for the Mac, exclusively -- some really amazing stuff.

IMG: What's next for Mixed Metaphor?

BEN: Well, we've shipped Derrat Sorcerum, and I think we're just going to see what the market throws back at us. We have a big new project, called Contagion, on deck, and have really high hopes for that one.

JOSH: We're going to take the experience from DS and apply it to some new products, probably some products that'll be a little more high-end, that'll push the envelope a little more. Things look pretty bright.

BEN: I hope we've established a name now, that Mixed Metaphor Software is sort of associated with quality products; we've secured ourselves a place in the Mac market, and we're moving on to bigger and better things.