

# Let the games begin

## Imagination fuels success at Ubisoft

By Mark Cardwell

WHEN IT COMES to making video games, Yannis Mallat knows all about the huge amounts of time and money that world-class studios must devote to the development of the next must-have hit. But as the competition intensifies to define and shape the next generation of digital entertainment—particularly the marriage of video games (or VGs) and movies—he believes the future of the multi-billion-dollar international gaming industry belongs to those firms that are best able to find and recruit the most fertile minds.

“Our industry is on the edge of a new frontier with many new and exciting capabilities and possibilities,” says Mallat, chief executive officer of the Montreal and Toronto studios of France-based Ubisoft, one of the world’s leading producers, publishers and distributors of interactive entertainment products. “The game now is all about convergence, [and] we need people with the technical know-how and creative talent to make it happen.”

That’s why Mallat is excited about the industry-altering prospects and potential of Ubisoft’s four Canadian studios: two in Quebec (Montreal and Quebec City), Vancouver and the recently announced Toronto studio. The flagship studio in Montreal, which opened in 1997 and today employs the majority of the company’s 2,300 Canadian employees—a 10-fold increase in only a decade, and the majority of Ubisoft’s workforce—leads the way. They have produced a total of 56 games, including many international best-selling titles, such as *Prince of Persia*, *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time* and the latest version of *Splinter Cell*, which hits store shelves this fall.

In the process, they have helped Ubisoft to achieve annual worldwide sales of \$1.7 billion and given a big boost to Canada’s international reputation as a hotbed of creative activity and expertise in the promising software sector.

That reputation will get a further boost in December, when Ubisoft Canada releases its most ambitious product yet: a 3-D game version of Canadian Oscar-winning director James Cameron’s new movie, *Avatar*. “We’re doing some amazing things,” Mallat says about the project, which is pushing his staff to their creative limits and helping to

cement Ubisoft’s emergence as an industry leader. In particular, he adds, the new project is putting the Montreal studio—where most of the work is being carried out and/or coordinated—on the world map as one of the hottest hubs for innovation and development in regard to both VG and 3-D. “Being in Montreal,” he says, “provides us, I think, with significant competitive advantages.”

According to Mallat, one of the city’s greatest strengths is its unique cultural character—an attribute that attracted Ubisoft in the first place. Founded in France by five brothers in the Guillemot family in 1986, Ubisoft had grown into one of Europe’s largest computer-game publishers by the early 1990s, when it began to expand its operations to other countries and continents. Not surprisingly, Montreal, the largest French-speaking city in the world after Paris, loomed large on the company’s radar as a base for its North American operations. “There was

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Before joining Ubisoft, Yann Mallat worked on rural development projects in West Africa.

## Ubisoft taps into Montreal's world-class creativity

WHEN UBISOFT OPENED its Montreal office, the city held appeal on several levels. Among them was the presence of a young but dynamic software industry. Montreal was home to two decade-old software companies—Autodesk Softimage and Discreet Logic—that developed software used to create 3-D computer animation for films. Notably, Softimage helped to produce the virtual prehistoric beasts that starred in Steven Spielberg's blockbuster hit *Jurassic Park*.

"That movie really marked the end of the Walt Disney 2-D cartoon era in Hollywood [and] put Montreal on the map for the creation of digital effects for movies," says Suzanne Guèvremont, the long-time director of the National Animation and Design (NAD) Centre in Montreal.

Launched in 1992 as a self-financed subsidiary of the vocational college (or CEGEP) in Jonquière, Quebec, the NAD Centre was—and remains—Canada's first and foremost vocational school for new technologies and new media, offering innovative and comprehensive training in everything from 3-D animation to video game (VG) design. From the get-go, the school—together with the fine-art and high-tech departments of Montreal's half-dozen universities and colleges—supplied the city's nascent software industry with the talent pool it needed to tackle a wide range of projects and contracts in a variety of fields.

In the late 1990s, when the advent of high-performance gaming consoles and technological advances triggered a global explosion in the VG market, Montreal became a global game-making hotbed almost overnight. "What made—and continues to make—Montreal unique is the almost perfect mix of business incentives and creative talent," says Wanda Meloni, founder and market analyst with M2 Research, a leading U.S. research firm that tracks digital entertainment, video games, 3-D and console trends around the world. In particular, Meloni believes the city's draw includes its reputation for developing cutting-edge entertainment software, the existence of product pipelines, a trained workforce, Quebec's generous system of tax credits for the software sector and competitive operating costs (almost 10 per cent lower than in other North American VG hubs). Another lure for start-up and international VG developers—including Ubisoft, Electronic Arts and Activision—is quality of life and the city's artistic flair. "There is a creative energy in Montreal," she adds, "that you don't find anywhere else in North America."—MC

**Creating a video game includes (clockwise starting below) brainstorming, drawing storyboards and creating realistic movements in the image capture studio.**



PHOTOS COURTESY OF UBISOFT



JEAN-FRANÇOIS BÉRUBÉ



# "The goal is quite simple: to develop better games for consumers."

—Yannis Mallat

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an obvious language affinity," says Mallat, a 35-year-old French native who joined Ubisoft—and the Montreal office—in 1999 as a project manager. "But I think it was a natural choice. The city had many things going for it."

## A city on the forefront

In many ways, the opening of the Ubisoft studio in 1997 was the spark that ignited the VG-making craze in Montreal. Set up on trendy Boulevard St-Laurent downtown, the shop hired dozens of local artistic animators, who learned the tricks of the trade working on licensed products from Playmobil and Disney, including the *Jungle Book* and *Donald Duck* video games. "Most of them had never made games before," Mallat tells *The Connection*. "The whole goal was to give them a chance to learn how."

That exercise, it seems, paid off in spades. In 2002, for example, the Montreal studio was given the mandate to develop the newest version of Ubisoft's biggest-selling game, *Prince of Persia*. Titled *The Sands of Time*, the product—the first one the company made for home gaming consoles, as opposed to computer versions—"revitalized the franchise," says Mallat.

That same year, the first big Ubisoft title to be wholly produced at the Montreal studio hit store shelves: *Splinter Cell*, a stealth game that sold 6 million copies for Microsoft's Xbox. "That's huge," says Mallat. "It was what we call a 'system seller'—a game so successful that it helps to drive console sales." Since then, the Montreal studio has produced a string of best-selling titles, including *Assassin's Creed* (action/adventure), the *Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six* games (a tactical squad shooter game), the *Far Cry* games (a first-person shooter) and the newly released *Splinter Cell: Conviction*.

At the same time, the Montreal studio has become the flagship of Ubisoft's 23 studios worldwide. Ubisoft plugged into the West Coast scene earlier this year through the acquisition of Action Pants, a Vancouver-based studio. Opened in 2006 and already recognized as a top employer and an up-and-comer in the Canadian West Coast's growing software scene, the studio employs 100-plus VG developers who are already putting the finishing touches on their first product for Ubisoft: a licensed sports franchise (*Academy of Champions*) that the French VG maker is designing for Wii.

Other titles created by Ubisoft for Wii include *My Fitness Coach*, *Hell's Kitchen*, *Six Flags Fun Park*, *Rayman Raving Rabbids TV Party* and *Shaun White Snowboarding*.

The main action, however, is at the Montreal


studio, which is by far the largest of its kind in the city, accounting for roughly half of the 4,500 VG creators who currently work at some 50 studios of all sizes in Montreal. Notably, Ubisoft has hired about 20 per cent of the 1,500 students who have graduated from the National Animation and Design Centre since it opened in 1992, and is sponsoring game-making programs at several colleges around the province.

"[Ubisoft] is the proverbial 800-pound gorilla in the Quebec gaming market [which generated \$500 million in production revenue in 2007]," says Wanda Meloni, founder and market analyst with M2 Research, a leading American research firm that tracks digital entertainment, video games, 3-D and console trends around the world. "And being in the same city with so many other companies makes it easier for them to advance their capabilities further, like with the *Avatar* project."

## Keeping an eye on the prize

Mallat can be excused for feeling a little giddy about the company he's been keeping these days. But he says that meeting and working with Steven Spielberg and other Hollywood heavyweights, such as James Cameron and Peter Jackson, for the development of cutting-edge video games based on their latest movies hasn't gone to his head.

"It's a creative and collaborative effort aimed at finding ways for two mediums to complement each other," says Mallat, who sold Cameron two years ago on the idea of joining with Ubisoft and a Montreal partner—3-D specialist Sensio—for the development of a game in conjunction with the production of *Avatar*, but with a different storyline. "Fortunately [Cameron] shared our vision that, in order to be good, we needed the lead time [and] the artistic freedom to develop a really good game."

The challenge now, says Mallat, is for the studio to maintain a healthy balance between the production of licensed products and the development of in-house brands—particularly in regard to VG versions of upcoming movies. "VG can explore the universe that directors create in their movies in a whole new way through interactivity, which is unique to VG," says Mallat. "Our vision of convergence is that by crossing processes, sharing tools and having people with different skills working on the same products, we will reach the next level. It's complicated, but the goal is quite simple: to develop better games for consumers." 

*Mark Cardwell is a freelance writer who grew up playing pinball but now plays video games.*

## supplier profile

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**Items sold at Costco and Costco.ca:** Most Ubisoft brand-name and licensed video game products, including four new titles this fall: *Splinter Cell*, *Academy of Champions*, *Rabbids Go Home* and *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*

**Comments on Costco:**

"Costco is a major player and an innovator in its field—like us."—Yannis Mallat

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