

# A DEGREE IN GAME DESIGN? WOO HOO!

**T**IME was when imaginary games were relegated to what you could dream up yourself. Today, you need only log onto a computer, pick up a console or thumb away on your smart phone to turn imagination into 'reality'.

What's really happening, of course, is you're tapping the imagination of a team of clever techno teams who come up with fantastic console games like *Wii Sport*, *The Sims 3*, *Super Mario Brothers* and *Grand Theft Auto*, as well as online games like *Moshi Monsters* and mobile games like *FIFA 10*.

And among these are popular locally generated games like *The Harvest*, created for the Windows phone 7 platform by Luma Arcade, the country's largest digital game development studio, as well as *Chase: Hollywood Stunt Driver* for Xbox and *Final Armada* for PS2/PSP, both created by I-Imagine.

The success of locally generated games speaks of an exciting industry that is growing exponentially in South Africa. "In the 11 years that I have been involved in the game development industry in South Africa, I have never seen it this strong or the potential so high," observes Luke Lamothe, technical director at Luma Arcade.

The skill-set in a game development studio is unusually diverse – including programmers, artists, sound engineers and designers – and to feed into the growth of this sector, the University of Witwatersrand is launching a new Game Design degree, which will dovetail creative arts students and electrical engineering students in the same

*Digital games are the "new literature", and to meet the demand, Wits is launching an exciting new Game Design degree, writes Helen Grange.*



Professor Christo Doherty, head of the Department of Digital Arts at Wits University says that game design has never been more popular in South Africa.

programme.

It's the brainchild of Professor Christo Doherty, head of the eight-year-old Department of Digital Arts, which has so far turned out about 60 graduates, many of whom are working in digital animation studios around the country, including on the 3D animated movie *Zambezia*.

The department teaches students interactive digital media, currently focusing on animation and interactive computer environments. Game

Design will be the third leg of the department's engagement with the future of digital media.

"I firmly believe digital games – storytelling in a virtual environment – are the literature of the future," says Doherty.

When the Digital Arts department was launched in 2003, it was for postgraduates who had done creative arts degrees, "but we found that some of our strongest applicants were science graduates", says

Doherty. "The new degree is a hugely exciting development. As a collaboration with the Wits School of Electrical Engineering, the programme will be similar to the very successful Digital Arts and Sciences degree at the University of Florida in the US," says Doherty.

Doherty says there is a drive to develop and market South African games, to create digital games that resonate with local gamers in context and characterisation, bearing in mind that to date few games have been developed with an African cultural consciousness.

Some digital games require great storytelling skill, and this process is very similar to filmmaking, complete with storyboards, which is where creative talent plays a critical role. "It depends on the type of game being created. It can be a fundamental pillar of design for a games involving in-depth fantasy or sci-fi role playing. For these games it's as important to get the story across in an engrossing, engaging manner as it is to wow people with your graphics and satisfy them with your gameplay," says Lamothe.

In games like your typical racing or puzzle game, however, the storytelling component would be virtually non-existent. Either way, the behind-the-scenes work that goes into creating a video game is grueling, involving large collaborative teams working very long hours.

But by all accounts, though, it's

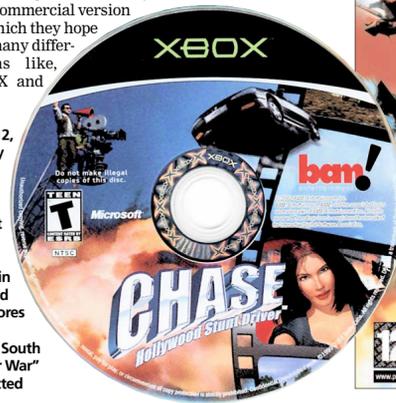
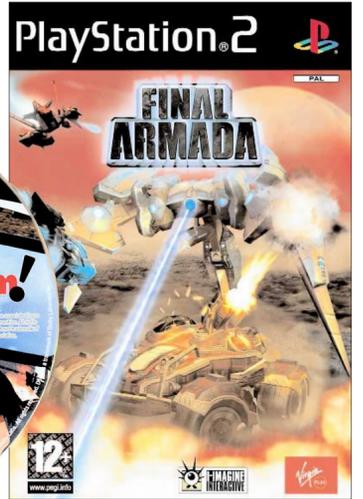
an excellent career option and if you're good at it, the sky's the limit. "Not only are there more local companies being started but there are also many opportunities for a game developer in the international market. The South African guys working for these companies are working on triple-A titles like *Uncharted* (action adventure video game) and *Need for Speed* (online racing game)," says Jacques Krige of [www.sagamedev.com](http://www.sagamedev.com), South Africa's most prominent game development community site.

Indeed, *Desktop Dungeons*, a hugely popular free game developed by QCF Design in Cape Town, earned the award for Excellence in Design at the Independent Games Festival in San Francisco this month. QCF Design is currently working on a commercial version of the game which they hope to release on many different platforms like Windows, OSX and iPhone.

● Until March 12, Christo Doherty is holding an exhibition of digital photographs at Resolution Gallery, in Jan Smuts Avenue in Rosebank. Titled "Bos", it explores the traumatic memory of the South African "Border War" using "constructed photography".



Games developed in South Africa include, clockwise from top, *The Harvest*, *Final Armada* and *Chase: Hollywood Stunt Driver*



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## BLADE RUNNER: TIME TO REPLICATE THE REPLICANTS...

**TOM PECK**

THIS sounds dangerous. A sci-fi film set in the distant future made in the recent past will now in the near future be the subject of a prequel set in what was once the distant future of the recent past, then a sequel set beyond that distant future.

Warner Bros are in the final stages of acquiring the film and tv rights to produce prequels and sequels of Ridley Scott's cult 1982 film *Blade Runner*.

Warner-based production outfit Alcon Entertainment are negotiating for the rights. Details

are at the moment sparing but a recent statement claims, no doubt to the relief of *Blade Runner*'s many fans, that a straight remake is off the cards.

"Alcon's franchise rights would be all-inclusive, but exclude rights to remake the original," said a statement carried by Slashfilm.com. "The

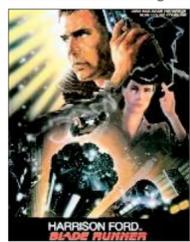
company, however, may produce projects based on situations introduced in the original film."

Such was its popularity as a VHS rental throughout the Eighties, that *Blade Runner* became one of the first films to be released on DVD.

Set in a dystopian Los Angeles of 2019, the film concerns a group of "replicants" – artificially engineered humanoids who have illegally returned to Earth from their work on man's "off-world colonies". Enter recently retired special police operative, "Blade Runner" Harrison Ford, who returns from retirement to hunt them down.

There is as yet no indication that director Ridley Scott would be involved with any revisiting of the movie, though the film's would-be producers said it would be "wonderful".

At the moment Scott is busy with *Prometheus*, a prequel to his *Alien*, which spawned one of the most successful franchises of all time. – The Independent



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